

**A ONCE AND PAST LOVE:
PALESTINE 1947, ISRAEL 1948**
A MEMOIR

IVOR WILKS

**Program of African Studies
Special Papers Series**

**ISSN Print 1949-0283
ISSN Online 1949-0291**

Program of African Studies
Northwestern University
620 Library Place
Evanston, IL 60208-4110
U.S.A.

TO

NEHEMIA LEVTZION (1935-2003)

TIRTZA LEVTZION (1935-2007)

AND TO

IBRAHIM ABU-LUGHOD (1929-2001)

FOR THEIR FRIENDSHIP

AND ENCOURAGEMENT

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PREAMBLE

In 1949 Dare Wilson published *Cordon and Search* (Gale & Polden, Aldershot), a history of the 6th Airborne Division in Palestine from 1945 to 1948, in which he served over those years. The work is as near to an official history as can be, and has a foreword by Major-General Sir Hugh Stockwell, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O. who commanded the division during the period in question. In his preface, Wilson, who was then a Major, wrote:

The purpose of this book is to place on record the main tasks and achievements of 6th Airborne Division between September, 1945, and April, 1948, in Palestine, where, in an atmosphere of hatred and violence, the Division was faced with a responsibility in many respects more unpleasant and difficult to carry out than any it had to fulfil in war. It is a story of which those who served with the Division at that time may feel justly proud; not because of any mastery achieved over the civil population, but because of the efficient, humane, and tolerant manner in which a distasteful duty was discharged. Such was the provocation that few forces in the world other than the British Army would have had either the discipline or patience to restrain themselves from counter-violence. The only reward was the satisfaction of a difficult job well done, and yet this in itself inspired the maintenance of an extremely high morale among all ranks of the Division.

This book has to do with the period in which Britain's mandate in Palestine ended, the state of Israel was born, and the Arab refugee problem originated. Many historians have written on these matters, and many more will do so. I arrived in Haifa, Palestine, on 23 December 1947, and left Haifa, Israel, on 30 June 1948. *A Once and Past Love* records my recollections of those tumultuous months. The genre is obviously that of memoir, but to this observation I add a caveat. A number of matters arise in the pages below that are germane to the conflicting interpretations that characterize the historiography of the period. In this respect *A Once and Past Love* may be read as a source book and one perhaps of particular interest to adherents of that approach so indelicately referred to as "history from the bottom up." My credentials in this respect were impeccable: I had served King and Country in Palestine in the lowly role of subaltern!

The Army and I parted ways in late 1948. In time I became an historian, and count myself among those who see their job as finding out what (really) happened in the past and explaining why things happened as they did and not otherwise. In putting together *A Once and Past Love* I have been acutely aware of the dangers of hindsight. Such success as I have had has been due primarily to a diary that survived the years. I have quoted extensively from it in order to convey something of the singularity of a document for the most part penned late at night by candlelight in a small tent pitched in the sorry remnants of what had once been a flourishing olive grove on the lower slope of Mount Carmel. For reasons that will become clear later, I had to be circumspect about what I wrote. The diary is, however, supplemented with various other items that have escaped destruction, most usefully family letters, official reports, newspaper clippings, and photographs. Such are the primary sources for this memoir, and I have sought to present events as I perceived and recorded them at the time. I have, however, taken one liberty. Many of the conversations I reported were culled from diary entries, but others tapped memories that had remained uncannily clear over the years even to the matter of individual quirks of speech.

The diary and the supplementary materials lay unattended until 1969 when a good friend and colleague at Northwestern University, Ibrahim Abu Lughod, persuaded me to search out the diary for him to see. He was first to suggest that it should be published. I had a number of commitments that took priority at the time, but I did produce an expurgated typescript of the diary by excising sections that were personal and of no relevance to the turbulent political

situation in Palestine. The shorter version of the diary was made available to several American scholars who wished to use it in courses on the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was not until 1988 that I finally acted on Abu-Lughod's suggestion.

In a series of conversations between 6 April and 10 June an experienced interviewer, Nancy Lawler, patiently led me through the diary entry by entry, activating memories (and in some cases false memories) of the months I spent in Palestine. The next year, 1989, she and I were married, and she accompanied me to Israel where I revisited familiar places and renewed old acquaintanceships. Our visit was greatly facilitated by two friends of long standing, the Israeli scholars Nehemia and Tirtza Levzion. They were the most generous of hosts, and were able to arrange meetings with many of their compatriots, some of them I had known in 1948 and some I had never met but their ways and mine had nevertheless crossed. The Levzions enthusiastically projected a Hebrew translation of *A Once and Past Love*, but with their sad deaths this has faltered.

The return to Israel made me aware that what has been forgotten may be as significant as what has been remembered, and that false memories as well as veridical ones may throw light on the past. The reader interested in such matters may find his or her attention engaged by an instance of false memory that is unraveled in the course of this memoir. Its theme was explored in an adaptation of the memoir by Richard Segall, whose one-man show, *Unholy Months in a Holy Land*, was performed with great flair at Northwestern University on 4 and 5 June 1993.

The Israel I loved and left in mid-1948 is scarcely recognizable in the Israel of today. The triumph of the Palestinian Jew became the tragedy of the Palestinian Arab. But there still are, as there were then, those of both nationalities who continue to work for a future in which a just peace will be established. This is their book.

CHAPTER ONE

DECEMBER 1947

Arriving in Palestine

On 29 November 1947 the General Assembly of the United Nations approved a proposal to partition Palestine between Arabs and Jews. Thirty-three of its members voted for the measure, thirteen against, ten abstained, and there was one absentee. I doubt whether I took much notice of that portentous vote. I was then a 2nd Lieutenant in the British Army, assigned to Middle East Land Forces and awaiting embarkation at a camp near Thetford, in Norfolk.

Trained first as an infantryman with the Queen's Royal Regiment, and then as a specialist in amphibious operations with the Royal Army Service Corps, I was expecting to be posted to 101 General Transport Company (Amphibian). This was in the Canal Zone of Egypt, where several waterborne units, badly mauled in the Italian campaigns of 1944, had found a resting place on the Great Bitter Lake. I was only in my twentieth year, but desperately anxious to look older. Every morning I inspected what seemed to hold promise of one day becoming a respectable moustache!

On 4 December I boarded the Empress of Australia in Liverpool. My last impression of England was of a medley of sounds rather than sights, a cacophony of hooting from ships that I could not see through the thick fog that enshrouded Merseyside. Late in the evening the beam of the Holyhead lighthouse was visible as we rounded the coast of north Wales. The Irish Sea was rough. The Bay of Biscay was wracked by storms, and all personnel were confined below deck for two days. Then Gibraltar loomed through the mists and we entered a Mediterranean that was calm and sunny. The island of Pantelleria in the Sicilian Channel had an intangibly dreamlike character as it slid by to starboard. Malta provided a few welcome hours in port. I relaxed on the boat deck and wrote an extraordinarily bad poem that I had the good sense to lose. Two or three days later we docked in Port Said. It was early morning but already very hot. The smell of oil from the refineries remains an indelible impression. I saw nothing of Port Said, having been instructed to proceed immediately by train to Suez.

I shared a compartment with a young Egyptian. He spoke English and took it upon himself to provide a useful commentary on the journey. Well versed in the logistics of travel, he procured bread and dried fish at El-Qantara and generously shared both with me. It was my first meal ashore. We reached Suez late in the afternoon. "We shall meet again, God willing," said my companion. We never did, of course, but as he vanished into the milling crowd a corporal appeared to escort me to a waiting vehicle. Within a short time I was the occupant of Tent 4, Base Transit Depot. It was 16 December. There I awaited further orders.

In the meantime I was free to wander round Suez. Unable to resist the lure of parts of the town posted, "Internationally Out of Bounds," I was duly spat on by those living in squalor of a kind quite unknown to me. I also visited the residential suburb of Port Tewfiq, and saw the sumptuous houses and clubs of the Egyptian haute bourgeoisie. Then, on 21 December, I was summoned to the Transit Camp office. There I learned that I was not to remain in the Canal Zone. I had been reassigned to British Troops in Palestine and placed on the strength of 376 Petrol Platoon near Haifa.

Much astonished, I assumed that someone somewhere in the bureaucratic depths of Headquarters, Middle East Land Forces, had decided that, my military training notwithstanding, a Higher School Certificate in scientific subjects better qualified me to serve as a technical officer. I was informed that I should report to the vehicle pool at 0700 the next day, when a car would be leaving for Jerusalem. I was more than a little intimidated to find that I was traveling in the company of a colonel whose conspicuous red tabs showed him to be an officer of the General Staff. He was both pompous and patronizing.

"Just arrived here have you, my boy?"

"Yes Sir."

"Royal Army Service Corps, what?"

"Yes Sir."

"Good outfit that. Used to be the Royal Waggoners in the old days, do you know."

"Yes Sir."

I did not know, of course, but how else was a junior subaltern to respond?

Between Suez and Isma'iliya, as we drove beside the Suez Canal and the Great Bitter Lake, the colonel talked about the misdeeds of Britain's Labour Government.

"Disgrace to the country, my boy. "They'll ruin us all."

"Yes Sir."

"That man Bevin, he ought to be shot."

"Yes Sir."

Since I regarded Cabinet Minister Ernest Bevin as having betrayed the cause of the Labour Party I felt able, for the first time, to make an honest albeit modest contribution to the conversation. "A disastrous Foreign Secretary," I said. "Quite right, my boy," the colonel replied, "you've got a good head on your shoulders." I was thankful to find that, having decided that we were of the same mind, the colonel regarded the matter as closed.

From Isma'iliya we struck eastwards into the wastes of Sinai. The desolation of the landscape seemed to inspire the colonel. He became almost loquacious. "A very old road, this," he said; "it's the way Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt, you know." I expressed my genuine interest with exclamations of "good gracious" and "my word" and the like. The colonel was, I came to learn, a liaison-officer who shuttled back and forth between General Headquarters, Middle East Land Forces, in the Canal Zone, and Headquarters, British Troops in Palestine, in Jerusalem. The situation in Palestine was an absolute shambles, he told me.

The Army could obtain no clear directives from the politicians in London. The Mandate would end, he said, but that was about all we could be sure of. There was that fellow Creech-Jones at the Colonial Office who was pro-Jewish ("should be Screech-Jones, what?"). Then there was that disaster ("good expression, my boy") Bevin at the Foreign Office, who was pro-Arab. And what about Attlee? He answered his own question: "Attlee sits on the fence. Major Attlee sits on the fence." I chuckled, to show that I realized that the Prime Minister had never attained the exalted military rank of my traveling companion.

The road ran between ranges of rugged hills to north and south, and then entered dune country. "A hundred thousand soldiers in Palestine," mused the colonel. "Where are we going to put them all?" On my own way to swell the number, I assumed that I was not expected to offer a solution. "And half a million tons of moveable equipment, what about that?" he added; "the Egyptians don't want it all in their country, you know." I was sure he was right about that. "Kenya, my boy, that's the place, but how are we going to get stuff there?" Gaining confidence, I remarked that Kenya was a long way from Palestine. My intervention was well received. "Good thinking, my boy. You'll go a long way in the army." I felt flattered, and contemplated the day when I, too, might be a colonel, generously putting some young subaltern at ease.

We crossed the great Wadi El Arish at the oasis of Abu Aweigila, and some 20 miles beyond entered Palestine at Hafir El 'Auja (known today as Nizzana). We had traveled about 200 miles from Suez. It was early afternoon and oppressively hot. The driver pulled into the large police post, where the colonel was obviously very well known. We were instantly seated in a shady corner of the yard, and beer was produced. "You must be very tired, my boy," the colonel said. I was not, having made so few contributions to the conversation, but he was quite exhausted and soon dozed off.

I strolled across the yard and was joined by a Palestine Police officer. "Must be hell working for that bugger," he remarked. I explained that the colonel was a transitory figure in my life, and I in his. "Thank God for that, mate," he said. He was an Australian. He insisted on taking me to see something of "old" El 'Auja, as he put it. My heart sank as I looked at the steep slopes of the huge tel that dominated the town, but fortunately this was not the objective he had in mind. He showed me some stretches of very rusted narrow gauge railway line, and a stone house that had once been El 'Auja Station. The Turks were building the railway in 1916, he said, to bring up troops and supplies in readiness for an assault on the Suez Canal. And so my first ancient monument in Palestine, unless the colonel could be

regarded as such, was a Great War one. The Australian took me to a small Arab bar where we drank rather a lot of arak in a rather short space of time. It was only then that he told me that his father had died at Gallipoli in 1915, fighting the Turks. I remember the occasion as a very touching one.

It was late afternoon when the colonel decided to resume the journey to Jerusalem. We had now left the Egyptian Sinai for the Palestinian Negev, but there was little change in the landscape. It was almost dark as we passed Bir 'Asluj, and quite dark when we reached Beersheba. My impressions of the long climb to Hebron, high in the Judean Mountains, are auditory rather than visual. The snoring of the colonel vied with the straining of the engine until, at Bethlehem, the colonel woke up. "Soon be Christmas, what?" With that I agreed.

His next comment, however, took me by surprise. "Ever heard of Dov Gruner, my boy?" As a matter of fact I had. Talks on current affairs were among the indignities to which officer cadets were regularly subjected, and I remembered an appalling man from the Army Education Corps assuring us that hanging was the only effective way of dealing with such terrorists as Gruner. I had no need to reply, however, for by now the colonel was once again in full spate. Something about being in Bethlehem a few days before Christmas had, it seemed, triggered off a stream of thoughts.

"The Jews, they had a bad time in Europe, my boy," he said. "Gas chambers and all that sort of thing. Bad show. Shouldn't treat even Jews that way, what? But can't have them turning against us, can we? No gas chambers in England, were there? A misguided fellow, that Dov Gruner. Attacked a police post, you know. Can't have that sort of thing going on. A brave chap, though. Too proud to ask for clemency. All mixed up in his mind, but you have to admire him, what? Shouldn't have hanged him. That's my opinion. What do you think, my boy?"

Emboldened by what I mistook to be the colonel's liberal sentiments, I expressed my agreement. Dov Gruner, I remarked, should have been treated as a prisoner of war. "Good God," said the colonel, quite aghast, "Nonsense, utter nonsense. We should have given him hard labour for life. Time for him to see the error of his ways." He paused. I knew what was coming. "Hanging," he said, "was too good for him." We sat in silence for the remaining few miles to Jerusalem. The car drew up at the King David Hotel. "Good night, sir," I said. "Prisoner of war indeed!" he replied. I never saw him again.

It was long past midnight and for me, unlike the colonel, there was no room at the inn that then housed the Secretariat of the Government of Palestine and the Headquarters of British Troops in Palestine. A sergeant was on duty at what had once been the reception desk. A telephone call sufficed. An elderly Arab was summoned to help me with my luggage, and I spent my first night in Palestine – or morning, to be accurate – at the Jerusalem YMCA. I slept fitfully for two or three hours before being awakened by the Muslim faithful being called to the first prayer of the day. I looked out of my window and saw the King David framed against a sun rising over the hills of Transjordan. I can recollect, vividly, the sense of excitement I felt, that beautiful dawn just two days before Christmas.

The Army was efficient. In the early hours of the morning some clerk in some busy little office had ascertained my location and prepared a movement order that was delivered into my hands as I had breakfast. Transport to Haifa had been arranged for 1500 hours. I spent the morning doing what every visitor to Jerusalem does. I retain in memory no more than a kaleidoscopic image of churches, mosques, shops, and narrow alleys leading from quarter to quarter – Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Armenian, and so forth. In the afternoon I was told that I was again to travel by car. This time I had no companion other than the driver, a truculent individual who quickly informed me that he was "bloody well browned off." He had left Haifa that morning to bring some "bigwigs" to Jerusalem, and obviously did not relish having to take a junior officer back on the same day. He wished, he said, that he was still driving a taxi in London. He had obviously belonged to that brand of cabbie who believed that passengers were to be moved from place to place but not talked to, for thereafter he was silent. Short on sleep, I dozed off. I confess, with a sense of opportunity missed, that I remember virtually nothing of our progress through the Arab towns of Ramallah, Nablus and Jenin.

"You all right, sir?" asked the driver; "we're nearly there." It was dusk. The hills of the Carmel range rose to our left, the valley of Jezreel stretched away to the right. It seemed a world apart from the deserts of the Negev and the mountains of Judea. Within less than half an hour I was delivered – the term seems appropriate – to 376 Petrol Platoon, Nesher Camp, and was rapidly established in the tent that was to become my home for the next six months. Three subalterns came to welcome me, and I joined them for dinner. It was a very quiet if not totally abstemious occasion that they used for sizing up the newcomer.

376 Petrol Platoon

My first day on duty was Christmas Eve. It turned out to be one of which I had, for reasons that will be quite apparent, only the vaguest of memories. I was invited to spend the evening at the mess of the NCOs, the Non-Commissioned Officers. "Just for a drink and a chat, sir," said the sergeant who brought the invitation. From one of my newly acquired fellow officers I gathered that the "drink and chat" was of the nature of a trial by ordeal. Pass it, he said, and the sergeants and corporals and lance corporals will be ready to die for you. But fail it, and you will have lost their respect and should never again presume to rely on them. I took all of this, of course, with a grain of salt, feeling sure that I could hold my own in any drinking session. And so I went to their mess like a lamb to the slaughter. A chorus of "good evening, sir" came from the dozen or so NCOs assembled at the bar. "Have an atomic cocktail," said the barman; "it's our specialty." A large glass was filled to the brim with measures of whisky, gin, rum, vodka, sherry and whatever happened to be on the shelves. I have no recollection of how many of those concoctions I drank. I vaguely remember thanking my hosts for their generosity, bidding them a good night, and walking – yes, actually walking – out of the mess. I was sure that I had survived the ordeal. I was quite unsure, however, of the way to my tent, for I had not been in Nesher Camp long enough to have any idea of its layout. Indeed, the only good reason for thinking that I did find my tent that night was that I woke up in it the next morning. But the NCOs, I learned later, were deeply impressed.

On Christmas morning I wandered rather disconsolately around the camp not at all sure what I was expected to do, but mid-afternoon saw the launching of a small party in the Officers' Mess. None of us had any idea whatsoever how, by early evening, two young women had joined us. No one present had invited them. We should, I suppose, have been suspicious. British soldiers were being sniped at daily on the streets of Haifa, and sometimes killed. Neither of the women, however, conformed to any image we had of a terrorist and it was for us, after all, the Season of Goodwill. The two were obviously close friends. They sat together in a corner, talking vivaciously and giggling much. As they cast their glances round the room, not one of us doubted that they were giggling about him.

The mess was a small one. Only five officers belonged to it, and the platoon was seldom at full strength. Modest gestures had been made to the season. The top of an evergreen of doubtful origins stood in a pot. It was rather pathetically bedecked with a few incandescent balls of the sort costing a penny or two so in any branch of Woolworth's. Some red and blue paper streamers had been strung between the bar counter and the ceiling. The whole effect was decidedly seedy. The saving grace was the elderly and portly Egyptian, Jad Mohammed Ahmed, who had come from Luxor to Haifa in search of employment. He was our cook, but he also doubled as head barman to which office he brought immense dignity. He never allowed our glasses to remain empty, and never failed to have us sign for each and every drink we called for. As the alcohol slowly took effect Jad Mohammed was known sometimes to have us sign for the same drink twice, but we did not mind. We were very fond of him and he, we felt, of us. He tolerated and even spoiled us, "his officers."

The platoon's commanding officer, Captain Hyden, was not present at the party. He had been posted elsewhere with effect from 30 December, and was on local leave. A Lt. Kenyon was the senior officer present. Second-in-command of 376 Petrol Platoon, he was also in charge of security for the whole of Nesher Camp, and we saw relatively little of him. 2nd/Lt. T. J. F. McClenahan had been posted to the platoon some weeks before me. I knew him simply as Paddy and we were to become the best of friends. 2nd/Lt. Wallace I do not

remember at all well, and I think that he must have been moved elsewhere soon after my arrival. And so there were the four of us at the party. We had all attended exclusively male schools, which was quite usual in those far-off times. Our combined knowledge of the opposite sex, other than of mothers or sisters, was miserably inadequate. If we looked back on any sexual encounters, it was most likely with mortification resulting from failed experiments if not outright disasters. Our successes had been on the rugger field or cricket pitch, and it was of such things that we talked together and modestly boasted of our prowess. But we had been taught to think of ourselves as gentlemen as well as officers, and we had the decency to feel ashamed at our awkwardness when these two women appeared in our male preserve.

Having joined the platoon only two days before, such was the pecking order that it was decided that I should approach the strangers in our midst. My ordeal of the night before, my first and I hoped last encounter with atomic cocktails, was rejected as an excuse. It was, then, not out of forwardness on my part but rather as an inescapable duty, that I approached the two and asked if I might get them drinks. The one, Leila, was Arab. I never did meet her again. The other, taller and with somewhat lighter hair, was Jewish. She said her name was Valentina, and that is how I came to know her. She is to play an important part in this memoir.

I spent the rest of the evening talking to Valentina. She was a talented conversationalist. Her English, a sixth language after Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Arabic and Farsi, was racy. I learned that her father, accused of bourgeois deviation, had fled Soviet Russia in the early 1920s. He settled in Iran, where he married. Valentina was born there. She was still a child when her parents moved to Palestine. She went to school in Haifa. This much she told me, but no more. Instead, she plied me with questions. I was flattered by her interest. I doubt whether I had ever talked as much about myself as I did that Christmas, at Valentina's prompting.

Valentina found out that my politics were leftwing but that I was also active in the Welsh nationalist cause. She learned that I had been in Coventry during the massive air raid of 14 November 1940, when my father had been grievously injured by blast. I told her that I had volunteered for the Indian Army in late 1945, and she queried my motives. Was that not a betrayal of my principles? I pointed out that a Labour government was already in office in Britain and was committed to Indian independence. "How then have you come to be in Palestine?" Valentina asked. I explained at some length and remember being astonished that she showed no signs of boredom. All these things and more we talked about on that Christmas Day of so long ago. The party ended in the early hours of the morning. Valentina made a telephone call, and a taxi arrived from Nesher to take her and Leila to Haifa.

Nesher? I shall have many occasions to refer to the Jewish village on the northern side of which our camp lay. Late as it was when our visitors left, I had duties to attend to. One of the responsibilities assigned to me on arrival at 376 Petrol Platoon was a nighttime one.

Balad esh-Sheikh was a small Arab town that adjoined the camp to the north. The platoon had four petrol storage tanks above the Wadi el-Tabel, a dried-up valley that lay between Nesher and Balad esh-Sheikh. One of these, Tank B, was non-operational at the time, but the other three, A, C and D, had to be dipped daily to record the amount of petrol each contained. It was, unfortunately, a figure that could only be obtained accurately when the heat of the day had given way to the cool of the night. This was my first encounter with the tanks.

My driver skilfully negotiated a road that wound backwards and forwards through Balad esh-Sheikh, slowly ascending the lower slopes of Mount Carmel. Arriving at the first tank, I remember getting out of the Jeep, returning the salutes of the Arab Legion guards, and dipping it. It was a procedure that I did not yet perform very expertly, and I took a long time obtaining the readings. It was a clear, starry night, and I found myself wondering if I could have fallen in love with a woman I had met only a few hours before, in an insalubrious building that served as Officers' Mess for 376 Petrol Platoon? I made sure that the telephone number that Valentina had given me was safe in my shirt pocket.

Petrol, Imperial Policy, and Palestine

Only a few hours elapsed between dipping the tanks in Wadi el-Tabel and rising, most reluctantly, to start work again. It was my third day in Nesher Camp, and I was beginning to see how 376 Petrol Platoon fitted within that complex military structure known as “British Troops in Palestine.” I began to pull together whatever data I could find on the oil industry in Middle East. I had, after all, become a minute – exceedingly minute – part of it!

At the end of World War II the British cabinet had given high priority to making supplies of oil from Middle East secure, and thereby containing Soviet expansion in that direction.

Discussions with strategists convinced Foreign Secretary Bevin that the military bases in Egypt were not well located for these purposes, and decided that British interests would best be served by building up military resources in Palestine. To this development Haifa was of key importance. The Kirkuk oil field in northern Iraq had the world’s largest known reserve.

From it the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) pumped about 2 million tons of crude oil annually into its storage tanks at Haifa, over 600 miles away, by a pipeline that traversed Transjordan. The ownership of the Company was approximately half British, a quarter American, and a quarter French, but some 5% belonged to a private financier. Another 2 million tons of crude oil reached Haifa through British companies in Tripoli, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf. Much of the oil was refined at the British-owned Consolidated Refineries Ltd. (CRL), virtually a subsidiary of IPC. There were plans, moreover, to treble the supply of oil to Haifa by the construction of a second and larger line from Kirkuk, and additionally to procure consignments from the distant fields in Kuwait. It was hoped to increase the output of the Haifa refinery to between 7 and 9 million tons a year by 1951. All such plans had to be abandoned when the events with which this memoir is concerned so abruptly transformed the political landscape of Middle East.

At the end of the European war the 6th Airborne Division, then in Germany, was repatriated and retrained for service in south-east Asia. The Japanese surrender obliged a change of plan. The buildup of troops in Palestine began with the arrival there, as part of the Imperial Strategic Reserve, of the 6th Airborne Division. This was in September 1945. There were several airfields in southern Palestine that had the capability for training troops for airborne operations, and it was not foreseen that the Division would become involved in matters of internal security. Reality turned out otherwise. The newly arrived troops were rapidly drawn into what were euphemistically styled, “peace-keeping duties”, in effect, the maintenance of civil order within the Palestine Mandate.

The 6th Airborne Division established its headquarters in the Carmelite Monastery on Mount Carmel, overlooking Haifa Bay. There was some wrangling about whether formations that had been in existence before the Division’s arrival, that is, North Palestine District and Haifa Base, should be added to its battle order. In early 1947 the General Officer commanding the Division arranged for the amalgamation of the two older groups that then came in some sense under his command. At 376 Petrol Platoon even a year later we were unsure of our exact position in the grand structure of British Troops in Palestine, but our orders came from Haifa through C.RASC, that is, Commander of the Royal Army Service Corps in Palestine.

Camp 149 covered a large expanse of wasteland at the foot of Mount Carmel adjoining Jewish Nesher and Arab Balad esh-Sheikh some 4 miles from Haifa on the Jenin road. It became known as Nesher Camp but might just as well have been given the Arabic name.

There were three static units within its perimeter, one being our Platoon. The second consisted of the headquarters and technical workshops of 4 Petrol Station Company, which managed actual vehicle filling stations in Haifa itself, Jerusalem, Sarafand, and Asluj. Its commanding officer was a major who, as senior officer in Nesher Camp, also served as its commander. 376 Petrol Platoon was not under his orders other than in such matters as camp security. The third static unit was a formidable looking building that lay far from either of the petrol units, and was in fact a massive refrigeration plant known as Nesher Cold Storage Depot. Much of the food consumed by British Troops in Palestine passed in and out of its portals. I never had reason to visit the site.

Nesher Camp

376 Petrol Platoon was classified as a “vital” unit, and in fact did serve a vital role in keeping the army in Palestine mobile. It obtained its petrol from the Consolidated Refineries Ltd., which lay a little over two miles north of Nesher Camp (though it was more than twice that distance by road since the marshes of Ard esh-Sharqiya intervened). The petrol was pumped into the four tanks along Wadi el-Tabel, and then fed by gravity to the platoon’s installations. McClenahan, in charge of Section A of the platoon, presided over the operations of the Nesher II Installation. There both rail and 800-gallon road tankers were filled. I was assigned responsibility for Section B. This consisted of the Nesher Transshipment Sidings where petrol was dispensed into jerricans for distribution by road convoys. At full strength the platoon consisted of a captain, four subalterns, and about 60 NCOs and Other Ranks. We also employed about 100 Arab labourers on the two operational installations. Most of them lived in Balad esh-Sheikh, but some came by bus from Haifa.

The security of 376 Petrol Platoon was constantly discussed as the number of terrorist attacks on British targets increased. C.RASC regularly sent us abstracts of intelligence reports on these. There was a ranking system in use that seemed to be based not so much on the vulnerability of a unit as on its strategic importance. Red was reserved for ones of critical importance for British national and strategic interests. We were relieved rather than chagrined to learn that 376 Petrol Platoon did not achieve this distinction. Blue status was accorded units the sabotage of which would prove a “considerable inconvenience.” Our four petrol storage tanks on the hillside above Wadi el-Tabel were so classified. Accordingly HQ 1st Security Company, 1st Garrison Group of the Arab Legion was stationed in Nesher Camp.

Three of its four platoons were made responsible for guarding our tanks. (The fourth, for the sake of the record, protected an explosives store at Jalama Junction, about four miles south of Nesher but was nothing to do with us).

The Arab presence did something to alleviate the otherwise melancholic image projected by Nesher Camp. “Our” company of the Legion was supplemented, first by five detachments of the 8th Garrison Company which guarded refineries in Haifa including those of the Iraq Petroleum Company, and second, by a troop of the Transjordan Frontier Force that could be deployed in trouble spots.

The offices, stores, living rooms and tents of 376 Petrol Platoon, and the installations in Sections A and B, all lay within the perimeter of Nesher Camp, and were regarded as reasonably safe. They merited neither a Red nor Blue security ranking, but only a Green. Nevertheless about 20 men of the Supernumerary Police Force (SPF) patrolled them at night. They arrived from their barracks in Haifa at sunset and departed at sunrise. The SPF had been created in 1936, during the Arab revolt, to protect Jewish settlements against attack. The recruits were Jewish and the instructors and officers British. In 1942, however, when German divisions in North Africa seemed poised to sweep through Egypt into Palestine, the SPF was reassigned to the defense of Palestine as such. As Jewish opposition to the Mandate strengthened, so the loyalty of the SPF to the Mandate Government weakened and finally faltered.

Jewish terrorist organizations presented a threat to 376 Petrol Platoon’s bulk supply of the petrol it broke down into receptacles as large as rail and road tankers and as small as jerricans.

Arab trade union organizations posed a threat of a different kind, one to the supply of the labour on which the daily operations of the platoon depended. Almost all of those employed by the platoon belonged to the Arab Workers’ Society. In addition to overseeing the Nesher Transshipment Sidings I was made responsible for negotiating with union officials. I guessed I was assigned this duty because my file at C.RASC reported the leftwing views that I had never concealed during my training. Be that as it may, it was obviously (and correctly) believed that in the circumstances I would avert rather than encourage strikes! Should I fail, however, C.RASC had a rapid response in place.

A detachment of Basuto pioneers under a Basuto NCO was quartered in Nesher Camp and, in the event of a strike, could swiftly take over the installations and keep them running until the strike was ended. As it turned out we never had to use the Basuto in that capacity, but C.RASC assigned them other auxiliary roles. One of these was to guard a section of the

main railway line on to which tankers from our Transshipment Sidings were shunted. The platoon was instructed to have its drivers get the pioneers to their posts in the evening and return them to camp in the morning. They had been recruited in Basutoland (now Lesotho), then one of the three British High Commission Territories in southern Africa, and in circumstances that are unknown to me they became part of Middle East Pioneer Group. They were not trained for combat and I do not remember them having rifles. Many of them had worked previously in the South African goldmines and had acquired some English. They sang a lot, soulful Christian Hymns so it seemed to me.

The stretch of line that the Basuto of Nesher Camp so resolutely guarded was a short section of what was shown on old platoon's maps as "Haifa and Hijaz Railway." At the end of 1947 the very idea of being able to take a train from Palestine to Saudi Arabia seemed quite preposterous. The few trains that steamed past our camp had only local destinations, and services even to Damascus and Amman had been suspended. One of the world's great railway systems had collapsed. The Turks had constructed it in the period before the First World War, little thinking their Middle Eastern empire was so soon to be lost. A track laid across inhospitable deserts linked Medina in the south with Damascus in the north, running through Amman and Deraa. At Deraa a branch line negotiated the valley of the Yarmuk, entered that of the Jordan below Lake Tiberias, and swung westwards through Afula to Haifa.

Readers of T. E. Lawrence, Lawrence ("of Arabia") will recall the pleasure he felt in disrupting traffic on the southern section of the network in 1917, thereby making his contribution to the collapse of Ottoman power.

Balad esh-Sheikh

Within a few days of my arrival at Nesher Camp I met Afif Dib Assad and his younger brother, Mohammed. They were union officials, but also worked for us as timekeeper and assistant timekeeper. Afif spoke little English. Mohammed was fluent, and became my interpreter. He and I were about the same age and of broadly compatible political views, though he described himself as a communist while I considered myself a socialist. We became good friends. Both Afif and Mohammed lived in Balad esh-Sheikh, and on 28 December, early in the morning and once the labourers had settled into their routines, Mohammed took me on a tour of the town.

Balad esh-Sheikh straggled up the lower eastern slopes of Mount Carmel. Not many years before it had been much smaller, but olives and grain had been grown on suitable parts of its land. Many of the farms had now been abandoned, but their overgrown fields could still be seen on the stony and steep terraced slopes above the town. The old "feudal" families, to use Mohammed's term, still lived in Balad esh-Sheikh, under their mukhtar (or now, mayor), but most of the people were recent immigrants, drawn to the area by the petroleum industry. They were "proletarians" – again, Mohammed's identification. They would not have been working at the refineries and army installations, he said, had their families been wealthy, for labourers' wages were not good. Many of them were not Palestinians but Syrians, particularly from Hawran near the Druze Mountain. There were also immigrants from Lebanon, Iraq, even Egypt. My guide thought that six or seven thousand people lived in the town.

We walked the streets together. In the part of the town nearest to Nesher Camp there were many substantial stone buildings of pleasant enough appearance. Mohammed pointed out a grave in what seemed once to have been the centre of the old town. It was, he said, that of a famous saint, Abdullah Sahli. Balad esh-Sheikh, meaning "the town of the sheikh," was named after him. "When did he die?" I asked. "A long time ago," said Mohammed; "even before I was born." Yes, indeed! I was later to learn that it was in the early 16th century that Ottoman Sultan Salim I granted Abdallah Sahli the land on which to build. Near the saint's grave was a large building that had once been, so Mohammed told me, a khan, that is, a hostel for travellers. It was in a state of terminal collapse, but nevertheless many children, ignoring the danger, played under its walls.

Mohammed and I reached higher parts of the town. Houses became smaller and then gave way to shacks constructed from wooden crates and rusted tin sheets. At Hawassa, virtually a

separate village, shacks gave way in turn to hovels made of sackcloth tacked on to a framework of sticks. Most of those living in them were illegal immigrants, said Mohammed, but the refineries needed labour and so the police and health authorities turned a blind eye to transgressions of the law. The quality of life in these poorer parts of the town was appalling. Cholera and smallpox were endemic and took their constant toll, but more immediately noticeable were the infected eyes of the children and the sores that covered arms and legs. The women were unveiled for the most part. I saw scarcely one that did not look in her sixties or seventies, though Mohammed assured me that most were not half that old. And so, courtesy of Mohammed, I first saw where most of our labourers lived. I had seen something of poverty in the slums of the larger English cities, but I had never known a community so utterly ravaged by it.

The visit to Balad esh-Sheikh much affected my relations with the labourers at the installations. Instructions from C.RASC made it clear that I was expected to make as few concessions as possible to union officials but that I should nevertheless dissuade them from strike action. Although I had no power to deal with such high level matters as rates of pay, I was able to make modest improvements in conditions at the work place, for example, meeting demands for longer rest breaks. It was little enough but at least something!

Nesher

It was lunchtime on 28 December and I had just returned from the visit to Balad esh-Sheikh. Jad Mohammed Ahmad announced that there was a telephone call for me. Naftali Praff introduced himself. He was speaking from the Nesher Cement Works he said, where he was a kiln-builder. He had been in the British Army during the war, a company sergeant major. His sister was married to a Londoner, a former Palestine policeman. He had heard that I had joined the platoon, and would like me to have a drink with him that evening. He gave directions to his house.

There seemed nothing untoward about the invitation and I arrived at 6 p.m. His house was small, built of wood but half-hidden by flowering creepers and shrubs. He introduced his wife, after which we settled down at a table on which several bottles of beer had already been placed. Praff, who often called himself Tony rather than Naftali, talked about his experiences. He had been a driver in the British Army in the early years of the war. Because he could speak Arabic, he was posted to a transport company running convoys from Haifa to Baghdad. The supplies they carried included torpedoes destined for the Red Army. I felt that that was too unlikely not to be true.

Another man joined us. He was introduced as Radin and described simply as a good friend. They spoke of Nesher. Its population, they said, was about 2,000. Its founders were mostly immigrants from Russia, escaping the pogroms. They leased a tract of unused land belonging to Balad esh-Sheikh. It was partly marsh, partly steep hillside. In the late 1910s the immigrants and their children began draining the marshes. The Nesher Cement Works was opened in 1923. At that time many Palestinian Arabs were employed in its quarries high on Mount Carmel.

The situation changed with the Arab Revolt of 1936-39. Jews, many of them from Kurdish lands, replaced the Palestinian workers. Relations with Balad esh-Sheikh became very strained. There is an interesting story about this, Radin said. Some of the land leased to the Jews was waqf, that is, land the revenue from which was to be used for charitable purposes. The waqf administrators decided to lay out a new Muslim burial place. They chose a piece of land in the area leased to Jews, and those living there were required to remove their houses. (I had walked past the cemetery through the area on my way to his house, Praff commented). Some of the Jews simply abandoned their houses, but others moved them on rollers to new locations. There was nothing to be done about it because they were only tenants. Praff joined in. Among the first of the Muslims to be buried there, he said, was Sheikh 'Izz ad-Din Kassam. He was a passionate nationalist and organized a band known as the Martyrs to fight for a Muslim Palestine, but in 1935 he was trapped and killed in Jenin by Palestine Police. His body was brought to Balad esh-Sheikh.

I asked Praff and Radin about the present state of relations between Nesher and Balad esh-Sheikh. The Second World War came, they said, and things began to settle down. Relations are now very good. Arabs come to Nesher to use its dispensary, and to bring vegetables for sale. Nesher even supplied Balad esh-Sheikh with some of its drinking water. I was somewhat skeptical since my fellow officers had told me that there had been some sort of Jewish attack on Balad esh-Sheikh about ten days before my arrival, but they knew no details about it. I mentioned it to my hosts. Radin said that some young Arab men had put up a checkpoint on the main road at Balad esh-Sheikh in order to search passing vehicles for arms.

A Jewish truck had crashed the barrier and those manning it had been fired upon. No one had been hurt, Radin claimed, but then only two days later a bomb had been thrown from another passing truck into a group of Arabs waiting at much the same place for a bus, and this time one or two people were killed and several badly injured. Radin and Praff both disclaimed any knowledge of who was responsible for the attack, and expressed their horror at the incident. People from Nesher had gone to give help to the wounded.

Arabs and Jews should be able to live side by side in peace, Praff insisted. There was no reason to have to fight. What, he asked, did I think? I replied that, having been in Palestine for only a week, I was not exactly an expert on the situation. Praff expressed the hope that this would be the first of many meetings, and that turned out to be the case. The evening had been a very pleasant, relaxed, and highly informative one.

Webster

Captain A. J. Webster arrived to take over 376 Petrol Platoon the next day, 29 December. He was a man in his middle to late forties, florid and slightly balding. On this occasion we, the subalterns who had been so gauche in the presence of two young women at a Christmas party, now knew better what was expected of us. We saluted our new commanding officer, shook his hand, introduced ourselves formally, took him to the mess, and apologized for its graceless appearance. Jad Mohammed Ahmed appeared to take orders for drinks, delighted that the mess had a captain once again presiding over it. We subalterns were relieved to find that Webster was a good drinking man. He was, we learned, from Birkenhead, where he owned a small factory. He was a keen sailor and had a yacht on the River Mersey. He had been called up at the very beginning of 1940, and had served with the British Army in India.

He had brought with him his batman. Toby was about 25, and exuded an inescapable aura of effeminacy. We four subalterns had the same reaction. "One of them," we thought. It must be remembered that in those days gay rights were unheard of, and, indeed, the very word "gay" had for us only its traditional meaning. We expected those of ambivalent sexuality to conceal the fact. But Toby did no such thing. He positively flaunted his female affectations. In time we became used to his putting on rouge and lipstick in the evenings, and his flirtatious behaviour ceased to outrage or even to amuse us.

We thought Webster a very pleasant sort of person, and so he turned out to be. At our first meeting he made it quite clear that his only remaining interest in the army was in getting out of it. He wanted, he informed us, as quiet a time as possible until he was demobilized later in the year. It was therefore ironic that the next day, the first of his command, would prove decidedly unquiet!

Massacre

The year ended on a savage note. On the morning of 30 December two grenades were thrown from a passing car into the main gate of Consolidated Refineries Ltd., where a hundred or so Arabs had gathered in the hope of securing work for the day. Did we hear the explosions at Nesher Camp? If so, no one took heed, for Mount Carmel would echo, and in doing so magnify, even a rifle shot on the plain below it. Six Arabs died on the spot, and 40 or more were injured. The Jewish workers in the refinery became the target of immediate reprisals. Within a short space of time dozens were beaten or stabbed to death, and many others seriously wounded. Lt. Kenyon, as security officer for Nesher Camp, learned of this by telephone from C.RASC in Haifa. He was ordered to put 376 Petrol Platoon on alert. The

problem was that many of the Arab workers at Consolidated Refineries lived in Balad esh-Sheikh, and it was feared that the rioting would spread to the labourers on our installations.

What did those who threw the grenades into that group of labourers hope to achieve? It could have been anticipated that the killing of the Arabs would immediately be avenged, and it turned out that 39 Jewish lives were lost. The Jewish assailants could scarcely have thought that one grenade attack would bring about the closure of Consolidated Refineries, though it was the case that some of its operations were shut down for a few days. It has become customary in recent times for terrorists to claim responsibility for their acts and even for acts for which they were not responsible. To the best of our knowledge, however, no group claimed to have launched the attack. We speculated that the object was simply to create fear and panic, randomly, among the Arabs of Haifa, and later events bore this out. The Palestine Police moved in a slow and seemingly partisan manner. An entry in my diary for 26 January 1948 reads,

Warrants are out for the arrest of some of those involved in the massacre at Consolidated Refineries Ltd. on 30 December. Seventeen are wanted for the murder of six Jews, out of a total of thirty-nine Jews killed. Twenty warrants have also been issued for the wounding of many other Jews on the same day. No reference was made to any search for the Jewish terrorists who had originated the violence.

I culled this information from a newspaper report. I brought it to the attention of Mohammed at the installations, and asked him if he knew whether any police searches were being made in Balad esh-Sheikh for the wanted men. Not to the best of his knowledge, he said, but if any of the men were in the town they would be safely hidden and treated like heroes. The diary entry for 26 January concluded, "How odd to remember that the land on which Nesher stands is still Arab-owned, while Balad esh-Sheikh still draws its water supply from Nesher."

CHAPTER 2

EARLY JANUARY 1948

Reprisal

It was the first day of January. In the early hours of the morning there was heavy fighting in Balad esh-Sheikh. I quote from the diary that I decided to keep for 1948:

I was woken at about 1 a.m. on New Year's Day, having only just gone to bed. A lot of small arms fire was coming into the area of the camp, and I had to lie flat in the cement trough of my tent – an ignoble start to 1948! As the fire moved away I managed to get to the main gate and calm down a number of Basutos who were running about half-dressed and in a state of panic. From there I could see that the Haganah forces on Carmel were firing into Balad esh-Sheikh, and sometimes over the town – by mistake – into us. They were using mortars and Bren guns as well as small arms. They maintained the attack without break for about one and a half hours.

It was obvious to us at the time that Nesher Camp as such was not under attack, though I only learned that the operation was a Haganah one later in the day, before I made the diary entry.

We discussed the events of the night over Jad Mohammed's excellent breakfast. It was agreed that some response was called for. Webster said that I should go to Balad esh-Sheikh to find out what had happened. I suggested that it might be a little risky to do so immediately. I had, however, already given him an account of my visit to the town four days earlier, and he did not hesitate to use his advantage. "I'm sure that your comrade Mohammed will look after you," he said. I was surprised and perhaps somewhat troubled that he had already taken note of my politics. Facetiously, I remarked that although unmarried I did have an ageing mother who....." Webster cut in. "Then what do you think we should do?" he asked. I ventured the idea that it might be useful to talk to one or other of the men I had met in Nesher, Praff or Radin, and see what account they could give of the attack. "Splendid," said Webster, "in that case I'll come with you." I telephoned Praff who said that we should meet him not at his house but at that of the mukhtar of Nesher – the house of the mayor we might now say but the older title then survived from Turkish times. Webster and I arrived to find a number of men awaiting us. Radin was among them. I introduced the new platoon commander to them. Rather undiplomatically, I thought, he immediately registered his protest, saying that it was only by sheer good luck that his men had suffered no casualties. Radin replied. He apologized for what had happened. The attack on Balad esh-Sheikh, he said, had been a reprisal for the massacre at the Consolidated Refineries. Many of the Arabs who had turned on their Jewish co-workers lived in Balad esh-Sheikh. But, he said, it must be understood that Nesher people had not carried out the attack. A Haganah unit had moved in from Haifa. "What unit?" Webster asked. He received no reply and could scarcely have expected one, for Haganah – the paramilitary arm of the Jewish Agency – remained an illegal organization in British eyes. Be that as it may, Webster thanked those present for their attention to his complaint and expressed himself satisfied with Radin's explanation.

The meeting ended and Praff insisted that Webster and I should come to his house and "have some beer." He wanted to welcome the new captain in a proper way, he said, and it was after all our New Year's Day. It soon became obvious that he wanted to talk more about previous day's attack. He hoped – optimistically we thought – that it would not destroy the good relations that Nesher enjoyed with Balad esh-Sheikh. We should understand, he said, that most of the Arabs who worked at the refineries were not true Balad esh-Sheikh people. They were immigrants, many of them not even Palestinians but Syrians. Even so, the Haganah unit in Nesher could not be used against Balad esh-Sheikh. It was against policy to attack your neighbours, because you had to go on living with them.

How many men were brought up from Haifa, we asked? Praff did not know. More like a platoon than a company, he thought, perhaps thirty or forty men. We must realize, he said, that he, personally, could not condemn the reprisal. Indeed, he was much impressed at the

speed with which it had been carried out. He could not, however, approve the action of the terrorists who had set off the whole chain of events. He had no doubt that the grenade attack at the Consolidated Refineries was the work of the Irgun Zvai Leumi (National Military Organisation), or as it was most commonly known, IZL. Such people were like fascists, he said, and no one in Nesher gave them any support. It was only later that I learned that the force that assaulted Balad esh-Sheikh was part of the 1st Battalion of Palmach, the shock troops of Haganah, and that Dan Laner was Battalion Commander at the time but Haim Avinoan led the actual attack.

Webster and I arrived back in camp at about 9 a.m. We found a Royal Engineers major, from 4 Petrol Station Company workshops, awaiting us. He wanted to know what we had been doing in Nesher and what we had learned about the attack. We gave him a brief account of the situation. "These Jews," he commented, "a pity Hitler did not get the rest of them!" I did not meet many British officers so virulently anti-Jewish as this, but I was becoming aware of the strong pro-Arab stance of many of those of high rank. Webster curtly informed the major that we had to get back to work.

Mohammed, as assistant timekeeper, came to the platoon office to report that only a few labourers had turned up for work. They were, he said, afraid that another attack would be made on Balad esh-Sheikh that night, and they wanted to be ready for it. By noon more than half of our workers were still absent, and our production was threatened. Mohammed said that they seemed to be sure, whatever their sources of information, that Haganah was preparing further assaults on Balad esh-Sheikh with the object of forcing the Arabs to abandon the town. I reported this to Webster and was very surprised when he told me, rather curtly, to show a little initiative! He detailed McClenahan to keep both installations working as best he could, and said that I should return to Nesher and find more out about what was being planned.

I found Praff at his house. Once again he sat me down with a bottle of beer and proceeded to telephone Radin. Their conversation was in Yiddish, which I could not understand. Praff then told me that no further operations against Balad esh-Sheikh were planned. The assault group that had attacked the town was no longer in the vicinity. I could also tell the workers, he said, that they had nothing to fear from the Haganah unit in Nesher. It was not set up for attack. It was part of the Guard Force, not the Field Force, and its only function was to protect Nesher village and the Cement Works.

I felt I could trust Praff -- or Radin, as the case may be. I returned to camp and, still smarting from Webster's remark about initiative, or rather the lack of it, decided to display some. I had Mohammed assembled those labourers who had by then reported for work. I told all present that there no further attack on Balad esh-Sheikh was pending. By late afternoon the work force was almost up to full strength again. I was relieved when Webster approved my action. "I'm beginning to like the cut of your jib," the yachtless yachtsman told me, but I was a little uneasy contemplating the consequences should I have been misled in Nesher. Webster, too, was unsure whether our work force could maintain an acceptable level of production granted the turbulence of the situation. He decided to have the Basuto pioneers put on standby to man the installations if necessary. I think I must have been duty officer that day for the task fell on me. "First have a serious word with whoever is in charge," he said. I knew what he meant, for neither of us had been pleased by the unsoldierly conduct of the Basuto at the time of the attack.

The Basuto lines were not far from the petrol platoon. The sergeant in charge presented himself and saluted smartly. Perhaps I spoke too sharply to him for tears rolled down his cheeks. I stood him at ease and gave him permission to speak. He had been in the Army many years, he said, and had served in Syria. "Even frostbite get me in the mountains," he claimed, seeing this as testimony to his dedication to service. In all this time he had never had problems with discipline, he said, though some of his men were not very happy because they should have been sent home many months ago. Instead they had been given a local leave in Jerusalem that they did not want. I began to feel that I had been unreasonable in telling off the sergeant. "I'm sure you will be able to deal with the problem," I said; "just give your men a talking to, and get them on their toes." I regarded that as the end of the

matter. Early in the evening, however, after the installations had closed and the workers had gone home, the sergeant came to my tent. "Platoon ready for inspection, Sir," he announced in a resounding parade-ground voice. I gave no sign of my utter surprise. "I'll be with you in a minute," I said, quickly putting on socks, shoes, and cap. The Basuto soldiers were drawn up, in the fading light, near the main gate. They stood at attention, eighty or so thumbs neatly lined up with eighty or so trouser seams on forty or so neatly pressed uniforms. I walked up and down the ranks, wondering whether the occupants of those uniforms would feel somehow disappointed if I failed to find anything wrong. If so, I disappointed them. They could have been British guardsmen on parade. "Thank you, Sergeant," I said; "please carry on." He saluted, and marched the men off. Webster, who had watched from way away, thought it was quite hilarious. He suggested that I might like to put it on daily. I was becoming more and more aware of my commanding officer's peculiar sense of humour.

Figures released by the Government Hospital in Haifa indicated that 14 Arabs (10 of them women or children) were killed in the attack on Balad-esh-Sheikh. Mohammed insisted that these figures were too low. Be that as it may, an entry in my diary reveals the ambivalence I had towards the attack:

It is difficult in some ways to condemn this sort of reprisal outright, for the massacre at the Refineries was horrifying – and all the more so since the dead Jews had been working peacefully alongside their assailants only a little earlier. A reprisal of this type is so indiscriminate, the guiltless die with the guilty. One of the great advantages of legalizing Haganah would be that they would just have to deal with the Jewish terrorist groups who cause such incidents, and bring them under control. How better it would be for Arab, Jew and Briton alike if only the Government in London would attempt some sort of constructive and enlightened approach to the whole problem – for Arab and Jewish workers are not in necessary conflict. But who knows what deals are being made at high levels of international politics.

Valentina and Friends

I had kept Valentina's telephone number in my tent, but had been much too busy, and indeed shy, to have called her. Finally I called her. It was on 3 January, when the installations were fully functioning once again. She had, she said, been hoping that I would get in touch. As it happens she was meeting a few friends for drinks that evening. Would I be able to join them? I accepted the invitation. Valentina said that we should meet at the Piccadilly Hotel in Hadar Hacarmel.

I had one of the platoon drivers take me into Haifa. Valentina sat at a table with two men. She looked very pretty. She was taller than I had remembered, and her hair longer and lighter. Her features were sharply cut, yet gave an impression of gentleness and high spirits. She introduced me to her companions, David and Avram. They were in their middle or perhaps late 20s, and shared a flat in the same building as Valentina's. We conversed easily and as the evening wore on, animatedly. Both men were, quite obviously, highly political beings. They belonged to kibbutzim, collective settlements, in the Jezreel - otherwise Esdraelon - Valley. David came from Mishmar Ha'emek, and Avram from Hazorea. These, they told me, were Hashomer Hatzar settlements. "Hashomer Hatzar," I asked? "The Young Guard," they said. The movement was founded in Poland and Galicia in 1913, to prepare young people for life in Palestine. It was both socialist and Zionist. Valentina had told them about my political background, they said, so I would understand that socialism and Zionism were not incompatible ideals.

To my surprise Valentina had prepared dinner in her flat. We walked the short distance. The conversation turned to the matter of Jewish immigration. When did I arrive in Palestine, David asked? Less than two weeks ago. Did I know that about the time that I came two ships bringing refugees from Europe had arrived at Haifa and that all the passengers had been immediately sent to detention camps in Cyprus? It was unbelievable, David said, that a Labour Party government in London could allow such a thing to happen. It was not only that the refugees had to have somewhere to live, but Palestine desperately needed more settlers. There was so much land that could be developed with hard work. It did not mean displacing

Arabs, because so much of the land was unused. Arabs and Jews could live side by side in peace.... Valentina broke in and told David that he was talking too much. I protested that I was very interested, and in fact I was. 376 Petrol Platoon received the Haifa Sub-district Secret Intelligence Summaries, and as it happens I had just read that the schooner *Unafraid* docked in Haifa on 23 December, with 882 persons mostly from Hungary on board, and that the November 29th 1947 arrived six days later with 688 persons from all parts of Europe. Other than the few with valid passports and visas, the passengers from both vessels were immediately transshipped to Cyprus. This gave me some confidence in David's credibility.

The conversation turned to the matter of the Partition Plan. To my surprise neither David nor Avram was enthusiastic about the United Nations vote in favour of it. Hashomer Hatza'ir, they said, wanted an independent bi-national state, with Arabs and Jews enjoying equal rights within it. What, they asked, would happen to the Arabs if Palestine was partitioned? Haj Amin el-Husseini, the ex-mufti of Jerusalem, wanted to see a separate Palestinian state created with himself as head. King Abdullah of Transjordan would try to annex Arab Palestine to his kingdom. The Arab League was already raising an army to invade Palestine. The Arabs, Avram added gloomily, will end up fighting each other.

David was going to Mishmar Ha'emek that evening, and said he would drop me at Nesher Camp. On the way we talked about Haganah. He said that the British would have to recognize it as a legal Jewish defence force, now that the United Nations had decided on partition. Was he in Haganah, I asked? He laughed and said that every Jewish man and woman was in it! But what about the IZL and the Stern Gang, I asked? These terrorists, he replied, were doing much harm to the Jewish cause. Many of them did not believe that the British really intended to withdraw from Palestine, and they were planning to step up their attacks on the army and police. Some of the Haganah commanders were in favour of destroying the terrorist organizations, but only if the British would recognize Haganah and be prepared to work with it. He was not sure about his own feelings, David said. He was not happy at the idea of Jews fighting Jews. He would like it if IZL and the Stern Gang disbanded. Their members would be welcomed into Haganah if they agreed to accept its policies.

I liked David. Walking from the road to my tent I wondered just who he was. The course the conversation had taken was unanticipated. I supposed that I would hear a tirade against the Arabs, whereas both David and Avram seemed more concerned with the matter of immigration. They saw the British government as the real villain in the scene, and seemed confident that good relations between Jews and Arabs could be reestablished once the Mandate ended. Valentina had said very little and seemed to defer to the two men. I certainly saw little of the high spirits she showed at the party ten days before.

I was woken in the night by rifle fire that seemed to come from the hillside above Balad esh-Sheikh. I feared that the town was again under attack, and that the assurances I had given our labourers were misplaced. I asked Mohammed about it the next morning. It was nothing, he said, just some young men practicing their marksmanship. This, I later found out, fell far short of the truth. Over the next week or so I became sure that Arab irregulars had moved into Balad esh-Sheikh during the early hours of 4 January, and that the shooting I had heard resulted from their jubilations.

Platoon Affairs

For the officers of 376 Petrol Platoon the day began with breakfast in the mess at 5.30. It was then that business was discussed over whatever Jad Mohammed Ahmed had concocted in the kitchen. The labourers were often a topic of our conversation. We kept their many and varied demands under constant review, but they knew that there was very little we could do to help them in that most important of all matters; higher wages. From time to time we discussed ways of improving our production procedures, but without any great enthusiasm as I remember it. And we laughed over what we regarded as contradictory and sometime absurd orders emanating from C.RASC Haifa.

Work started at the installations at 6.30 a.m. and came to a temporary halt around noon, when the metal equipment had become too hot to handle without burns. Work was resumed

from 5 p.m. until, in principle, about 8. The labourers, however, were often assigned a quota for the day, for example, to fill and stack so many hundred jerricans. If they worked hard they were sometimes able to leave the installations well before closing time. These receptacles, known officially as POL (Petrol, Oil and Lubricant) Containers, were heavy when filled. One filled with petrol weighed, I guess, between 40 and 50 lbs. They had to be stacked, on their sides, to a height of seven or so feet. It was truly hard work, and became all the more so as the heat increased. Webster and I viewed the labourers' demands for longer breaks rather differently. They could not, of course, all take simultaneous breaks since petrol tankers were constantly arriving to be filled and lorries to be loaded with cans. I negotiated an agreement with the union officials to the effect that a labourer's breaks should be regarded as his entitlement. He could either take them all and work through to 8 p.m. or he could "save" some of his breaks and leave work that much earlier. The scheme met with general approval and our timekeepers agreed to administer it. Webster, however, was not happy with the arrangement, seeing it as encouraging union agitation for a shorter working day. McClenahan said that he thought the plan would work well in the Section A installations, whereupon Webster dropped the matter. By this time McClenahan and I were becoming close friends. He was a tall, red-haired Irishman who held radical enough views but, I always thought, more the result of being an anarchist by temperament than a socialist by conviction.

Despite their miserably low wages the labourers took a certain proprietary pride in those extended ranks of jerricans in the installations, thousands upon thousands of them stacked with precision. Sometimes, drawing on a knack I had acquired pitch forking hay on to haystacks (in far off times when haystacks still existed, and I was a schoolboy keen to earn a little pocket money), I would demonstrate my prowess by placing a full can of petrol a good eight feet above ground level. The labourers were impressed, and cheered, and then vied with each other to position ones even higher. I rapidly came to admire and respect them, though I had to admit that, clothed in little better than rags, they looked a rather villainous crew. Most of them were undernourished, and some were obviously sick but could not afford to lose a day's pay by failing to appear for work.

The labourers were organized in the Palestine Arab Worker's Society. This gave them a certain panache, most apparent in the morning when they arrived for work. On entering camp they would encounter Basuto pioneers carrying out their first duty of the day, specifically: patiently whitewashing the old and holed jerricans that, half buried in the ground, demarcated the area of the officers' mess from that of the NCOs, of platoon headquarters from quartermaster's store, of kitchen from latrines, and so forth. The labourers would jeer at them, mocking them in Arabic that they could not understand. Was racism to be detected in this? I did not think so. The hostility resulted from the knowledge that the Basuto would be used as strikebreakers whenever necessary. We learned that C.RASC worked on a belief that 50 Basuto (or other African) Pioneers would suffice to keep the installations ticking over, though not fully functioning, in the event of a strike.

The Palestine Arab Workers' Society had been founded in 1925, but was drastically reformed in 1942 under the leadership of Sami Taha. There was an elderly union official on our installations who had played an important part in the changes. He commanded the respect of everyone, the ordinary labourers and their foremen, rais and bash-rais alike. He was the contact between the Nesher Camp branch and the union's headquarter in Haifa. I never did get to know him well. Because of his lack of English and mine of Arabic he preferred to have Mohammed's elder brother, Afif Dib Assad, negotiate with me as the platoon's representative. Afif was arrogant, indolent and corrupt, but otherwise a pleasant enough fellow. I was never sure just how much respect he enjoyed, and in fact it was Mohammed who, with his fluency in English and his strong political commitment, most often voiced the interests of the men. He was much inspired by Sami Taha, who had continued to lead the Arab Workers' Society until he was assassinated in September 1947. "He was a good man," Mohammed said, "and twenty thousand Arabs, carrying two hundred wreaths, followed him to the grave." Needing all the help I could get in sorting out union matters, I consulted Praff in Nesher. I was surprised when he told me that the Arab Workers' Society was considered a right wing union but that the rival Arab Workers' Congress was far to the left. Praff, in

turn, seemed surprised when I told him how many of the platoon's workers described themselves as being communist.

On 6 January many labourers again failed to report for work. Mohammed offered an explanation. Those who came from Haifa used the No. 1 bus. It had been attacked the previous day, late in the afternoon. A man in a taxi had opened fire on it with an automatic weapon. Mohammed did not know how many people had been killed or wounded, but there was again great alarm in Balad esh-Sheikh.... A clerk from platoon office interrupted us. I should report to Webster immediately. I wondered, rather bleakly, quite what sort of initiative I might be expected to display on this occasion. In fact a driver from C.RASC Haifa had just delivered a letter informing us that the General Officer Commanding North Palestine District, Major General H. C. Stockwell, had held a meeting at 6th Airborne Division headquarters to discuss the security of "vital" installations, including 376 Petrol Platoon. Among other things, Stockwell was worried by the capacity of IZL to terrorize Arab workers travelling to and from both military and civilian installations. Accordingly, he wrote, he was instructing the Division to work out a system of escorts or patrols to avoid disruption. "

"What a lot of nonsense," Webster remarked; "no one's going to bother the few labourers we employ." "Well, Sir," I replied, "as a matter of fact I've just come from the installations and we do have a bit of a problem right at the moment." I did not record nor can I recall whether Webster had the Basuto called out on this particular occasion.

On Keeping a Diary

As a junior subaltern, travelling from England to the Middle East by troopship, I was allowed to bring with me one kit bag and one cabin trunk of dimensions that were determined by rank. My trunk was therefore modest in size. I could find space for only two books. One I selected was Hugh MacDiarmid's 1943 autobiography, *Lucky Poet*. While on embarkation leave in November, through the good offices of my Welsh mentor and friend, Delwyn Phillips, I had been able to spend some time with MacDiarmid. He delighted in recounting how he had been expelled from the Scottish Nationalist Party for communist deviations and from the Communist Party for nationalist deviations. I found his company inspiring, and felt sure that such spare time as I might have in the months ahead would profitably be spent in pondering *Lucky Poet*. I also took with me the recently published diaries of Frank Thompson, who had served in the Mediterranean and Middle East before being parachuted into Bulgaria to work with the partisans. He fell into German hands and was executed in June 1944. His diaries were subsequently edited as *There is a Spirit in Europe* by his mother and younger brother (the latter later to become well known for his radical writings on British social history). The book made a strong impression on me as I suspect it did on many of my generation who had grown up during the war and were in search of the better and braver world that we believed was there for our making.

It was Frank Thompson's diary that gave me the idea of keeping one of my own. I knew that I could neither emulate his literary skills nor match the intrinsic interest of what he had to say. Nevertheless, a diary of sorts made its debut in a small tent ill lit by a particularly bothersome oil lamp. Today, more than 60 years later, the diary is quite indispensable for putting together this memoir, but it is not sufficient. Memory has to be tapped.

As an officer cadet in Aldershot I had felt able to express my views quite openly. I suppose the strain of socialism to which I was drawn was that of the libertarian left (which sounds much less threatening than "anarcho-syndicalism" but more so than "Jefferson democracy"). I had never been a member of the Communist Party, but in 1946 I had joined the Welsh Nationalist Party (now *Plaid Cymru*). This organization's demand for self-government was regarded by the British security services as seditious if not treasonable, and I did not dismiss the possibility of coming under surveillance in Palestine. Be that as it may, I was cautious about what and who I mentioned in it.

I have the first page of the original manuscript before me. It has an Arabic proverb cited and translated by Timekeeper Mohammed as, "hasty thoughts are slippery thoughts." It was, I felt, a most appropriate beginning to my literary enterprise, and I wish that I had paid more

heed to its message. Even in my first entry I indulged in vainglorious (and undoubtedly “slippery”) rhetoric. “I shall,” I announced,

try to interpret, from my own experiences, the impact of world affairs upon Palestine, and of Palestinian affairs upon the world. The scene is set for far-reaching happenings in the Middle East; here British, USSR, and USA interests are all brought into focus; here, on the Jewish-Arab question, the United Nations may well stand or fall; and here lies the point of contact between three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa.

It was, of course, all too ambitious, too grandiose. Inevitably, however, the real world soon began to intrude itself, the world of Jewish Nesher and Arab Balad esh-Sheikh; of Praff, Valentina and David; of Mohammed and Afif Dib Assad; of 376 Petrol Platoon and North Palestine District. I began more to report events, less to interpret them using preconceived notions. The diary became an accurate but for the most part much leaner record of events. I now rather like the economy and terseness of, for example, an entry for 8 January:

Our jeep driver was shot at yesterday when leaving Haifa. The bullet passed horizontally through the cushion on which he was sitting. He was rather proud to have been shot at, I think.

376 Petrol Platoon received regular, and secret, Intelligence Summaries that were compiled by General Staff, Intelligence, Jerusalem, and, suitably edited, were transmitted to H.Q., North Palestine District where they were further edited before distribution to local units. I read these Intelligence Summaries with great interest and extracts from them greatly enriched the diary.

Jerricans and Ghaffirs

Many thousands of jerricans, both full and empty, were stacked in the platoon’s installations, and theft was a constant problem. The long eastern perimeter of the camp could easily be breached, for beyond it there was only marshy wasteland. The officer commanding the 1st Security Company of the Arab Legion consistently refused to allow his men to be used to patrol it. They were combat soldiers, not watchmen, he insisted; their job was to protect the petrol tanks above Balad esh-Sheikh against attack, but not to police the installations. We had, therefore, to rely on the Jewish supernumeraries to guard the perimeters at night, but a problem was developing. There were reports from all parts of Palestine that these men were deserting, taking with them their arms and uniforms. We were not surprised, then, when we were informed on 8 January that the Supernumerary Police Force was being disbanded. With immediate effect we were to recruit Arab ghaffirs, unarmed watchmen, as replacements. “These things are sent to try us,” said Webster, and asked me to set about finding suitable candidates.

I could think of no way of proceeding other than by, in turn, asking Afif Dib Assad and Mohammed to start a search. They were delighted at this opportunity of extending the range of their patronage. I expected them to take a kickback from the wages of those they recruited, but had to accept that such was the way of things. Over the next two or three days they paraded forty or more aspiring watchmen before me. Some came from Balad esh-Sheikh, some from Haifa, some from Nazareth. I had to determine, first, whether they were Palestinian nationals; second, if not, whether they were legal immigrants; and third (apparently of least concern to those who did not have to supervise them), whether they were capable of doing the job. After rejecting the physically feeble, the mentally incapable, and those without satisfactory papers, there were very few left. I had little to go on other than my intuition with respect to these. This, naturally, often failed me. Mahmood Mohammed Sulamih was a case in point.

Sulamih appeared to me to present no problems. He was a single man, short but well built. He was born in Syria in 1923, and both his father and mother were Syrian. He was a recent but quite legal immigrant, having just obtained his Civil Identity Card in Haifa on 8 January.

I thought he had the makings of a perfectly good ghaffir, and I took him on. The platoon clerk then had to fill out a "Combined Vetting and Application Form," to which Sulamih affixed his thumbprint. With a photograph attached, this document was then sent to the Security Identification Section (SIS). This was an Intelligence Corps unit, which I assumed came under GSI, the army's General Staff, Intelligence, Jerusalem. However that may be, a few days later Sulamih's papers were returned to me, heavily scored in red pencil, "Not to go. Discharge." No reasons were given, of course. They never were. I asked Mohammed what he thought the problem was. Many Arab irregulars, he said, were moving from Syria into the Haifa area, and Sulamih had perhaps been identified as one of them. I knew that Mohammed was in fact right about infiltration from Syria. Looking over the Secret Intelligence Reports on file in the platoon, I had noted a piece from as early as 21 November 1947, to the effect that "the Arab League countries have opened recruiting centres in the Lebanon and Syria to enlist volunteers for the cause of Palestine Arabs." I was also by this time fairly sure that it was Arab irregulars who had moved into Balad-esh Sheikh on 4 January. Up to a point, then, Mohammed was being frank. I suspected, however, but could never be sure, that the irregulars in Balad esh-Sheikh had ordered him and his brother to present Sulamih and probably others to me as a ghaffirs, wishing to establish some of their number in the platoon's work force.

According to the schedule we received from C.RASC, Haifa, the supernumeraries were not to be withdrawn from 376 Petrol Platoon until 13 January. They, however, decided to take the initiative, for none turned up for duty on 9 January. Responsibility for our installations that night devolved upon the one and only ghaffir I had so far procured. The result might have been predicted. Shortly before 6 a.m. at the end of his first night on duty, he appeared at the officers' mess as we had emptied our cereal bowls and awaited the sausages and eggs that Jad Mohammed was frying. I went out to my protégé. He informed me that a large number of jerricans had been stolen. He had, of course, neither heard nor seen a thing, but had noticed a gap in the stacks as soon as it started to get light. "Were you asleep while on duty?" I asked, knowing full well that he was. He was very hurt by the suggestion. "Did you turn a blind eye while your friends from Balad esh-Sheikh stole them?" He was even more offended. He said that the missing cans were from a stack near the Nesher perimeter, and that people from there must have broken in. I thought that this might well have been true for the absence of the supernumeraries would surely have been known to our Jewish neighbours.

After breakfast Webster called me aside. He said that he was sure we both felt the same way. About what, I wondered? We were both willing to help the Jews, were we not, Webster said? They had been through such terrible times in Europe. If Nesher people had stolen the jerricans, we needed to know. We could help them, but it would not do to have them simply plundering the installations. I was taken aback by Webster's remarks. Up to that time I had no reason to think that he was particularly sympathetic to the Jewish plight, though he obviously had realized that I was. He wanted me, he said, to go to Nesher and discuss "the whole business" with Praff. "What whole business?" I asked. "You know what I mean," he said. I didn't.

Nesher Cement Works

I found Praff at the Nesher Cement Works, where he worked as a kiln builder. I told him about the theft, and conveyed Webster's sentiments to him. I said that it was my understanding that my commanding officer was willing to turn a blind eye to the disappearance of jerricans providing he was kept informed of what was going on. Praff did not know what on earth I was talking about, nor for that matter did I! He said that we should go and talk to the Chief Engineer of the Cement Works, Mr. Schnitlander. I could speak quite openly to him about the thefts.

Whatever sort of image I had at that time of a Prussian aristocrat, Schnitlander surely conformed to it. I repeated what I had told Naftali. "We do not steal jerricans," Schnitlander said, brusquely, "but we will buy them if your commanding officer wishes to sell." I replied, with as much dignity as I could muster, "Mr. Schnitlander, my commanding officer is not a

jerrican salesman.” The Chief Engineer abruptly changed the direction of the conversation, and indeed monopolized it for the next five minutes or so.

He had lived in Nesher since it was founded, Schnitlander he said. He was among those who had marked out the plan of the cement works from rafts punted through the marshes. They used to employ Germans to run the works. Then they found out that they were all Nazis, so they sacked them. The Cement Works are a fine example of benevolent capitalism. They have a closed shop system and all the workers have to belong to the union. It is a social democratic union, affiliated to the Histadruth. Only a few days ago two workers were sacked because they were found out to be communists. The collective farms are wonderful places, the Chief Engineer continued, quite inconsequentially. People think of them as socialist institutions, but they owe nothing to do with the socialist idea of collectives. They are in a tradition that goes back to Biblical times.

The harangue ended as abruptly as it had begun. Schnitlander spoke to Praff in Yiddish, after which we took our leave. I did not like the Chief Engineer, and wondered whether he was completely sane. I said as much to Praff. “Don’t let his attitude worry you,” I was assured; “Mr. Schnitlander is arrogant by nature.” Praff went on to tell me (“in confidence,” he said) that Haganah made use of the Cement Works for various purposes, and that Schnitlander had to be kept informed of what was going on in order to retain his goodwill. “That,” said Praff, “is why I took you to see him, so that now we can ignore him.” I had no idea what he meant.

We walked over to Praff’s house and as usual beer at once appeared on the table. A man introduced as Willie (or so it sounded to me) Feldinger joined us. Praff said that he had served in the British Army until 1946, and asked me not to be offended if they spoke in Yiddish for a few minutes. Feldinger then took over the conversation. The matter of the missing jerricans, he said, was one that the local Haganah unit in Nesher should look into, but its commander was away at present. On Radin’s return he, Feldinger, would tell him about the missing cans and leave him to take appropriate action. I should explain to Captain Webster that the Haganah unit in Nesher did not have the authority to involve itself in matters of procurement. It was formed to guard first, Nesher village; second, Nesher Cement Works; and third, the mountain road that led to the limestone quarries.

I assumed that Feldinger was claiming that the jerricans were not stolen by the Nesher unit but, if they were, then they were acting without orders. His next remark took me by surprise. “Are you sure that Captain Webster wants to help us?” he asked. I wondered whether Webster would approve the initiative I took this time, when I replied in the affirmative. I expected to be questioned further, but again to my surprise Praff and Feldinger said that they were about to drive up the mountain road. Would I like to go with them? I expressed enthusiasm. The road, they explained, was a major problem for them. It belonged to the Cement Works and ran from Nesher to the top of Mount Carmel. If the Arabs succeeded in closing the Haifa road at Balad esh-Sheikh, as one day they would undoubtedly attempt, then the mountain road would become Nesher’s only link to Haifa. Haganah intelligence, they said, had learned that the Arabs had recruited a number of expert saboteurs, and it was feared that they would mine the mountain road. Nesher’s Haganah unit had therefore to inspect it regularly.

In agreeing to accompany Praff and Feldinger, I had not quite realized the purpose of the trip. By this time, however, it was too late to back out at least with honour. “There is no real danger now,” they said. “Of course not,” I agreed, wondering what my parents might make of a letter informing them that 2/Lt. Wilks of the Royal Army Service Corps had been killed in action while on patrol with a unit of Haganah’s Guard Force!

The narrow road ascended Carmel in a series of hairpin bends. On each stretch we passed under the cable cars carrying stone from the quarries to the cement works. We stopped from time to time and either Praff or Feldinger would carefully examine an irregularity in the road surface that they thought suspicious but that seemed to my untrained eye no more than a tuft of grass. We did not find any mines. At the end of the climb my companions found much pleasure in identifying features of the landscape for me. It was also the only feature of the morning’s activities that I felt able to write about in the diary:

The view really is stupendous – and the sight from here of man’s activities, impressive. The houses of Haifa, rising up the hillside, are elegant; numerous ships lie in the harbour framed against the so very blue water. The flat Emek Zebulem is an area of beautifully cultivated farmland, merging into the industrial belt near the coast. The huge petrol storage tanks glisten silver, yet even they are dwarfed by the vast yellow cooling towers. Further inland one can see the white houses of the collective farms, and the watchtowers rising above them. Beyond are the barren mountainsides of the Lebanese and Syrian borders, and, yet further, the towering height of Mount Hermon. There is still snow on its summit.

A Bookshop in Haifa

On 10 January I used the diary to try to spell out early reactions to the situation in which I found myself. I wrote,

In the rather ill-organized trade-union in Balad esh-Sheikh, or in the town-council of the moshavoth of adjoining Nesher, must lie the key to the future. But for a long time this tiny country of Palestine will be used as a pawn in Great Power politics. External forces will increasingly set Jew against Arab, and Arab against Jew, and maybe Jew against Jew and Arab against Arab – because there are those “striving for a partnership with imperialism.”

I picked up the last phrase from a pamphlet I had bought in a left-wing bookshop near the port in Haifa. The author accused Jewish and Arab nationalists alike of weakening the class struggle, and urged both to unite and reject such “deviations.”

The bookshop deserves more than a passing reference. I had visited it several times for my duties sometimes took me to the port. It was stocked with books and pamphlets and magazines in languages some of which could not have been spoken or read by anyone within a distance of, to err on the conservative side, a thousand miles. I was particularly fascinated by two works, both translations of some version of the Arthurian legend, the one into Maori and the other into Zulu. Most of the shop’s stock was arranged in stacks that, firmly positioned on the floor, swayed alarmingly as they almost but not quite reached the ceiling. The custodian of these very non-Corinthian columns had a quite uncanny faculty of knowing just where to locate whatever he thought might be of interest to a customer, and a quite amazing flair for rapidly taking apart and reassembling stacks in such a way as to bring desired items into retrievable positions. To be able to do this obviously afforded him enormous satisfaction, but he seemed to have little interest in actually selling anything to anyone. Nevertheless, while reluctant to have his stock diminished by sales, he positively cultivated browsers. A regular was Tewfik. I first met him early in January. We introduced ourselves. “So you are from Nesher Camp?” he said; “then you know all about the massacre at Balad esh-Sheikh.” I disclaimed any knowledge of a massacre other than that at the Consolidated Refineries. “You are being perverse,” he said; “armed Jews attacked and killed unarmed women and children at Balad esh-Sheikh and that makes it a massacre if I know what that word means.” He was, of course, fluent in English, and it was not so much what he said as how he said it that was offensive. He exuded an aura of upper class breeding. He was the effendi, and I was the very junior officer. I did not pursue the conversation but added him to my list of people I did not like. I record this first unpromising meeting only because Tewfik will figure later in this memoir when our relations became friendly.

Miriam’s café

In the evenings McClenahan and I would often escape the tedium of the officers’ mess by visiting a café in Nesher. Its proprietor was an affable young woman named Miriam. Informality reigned. We steadied our beers as a gaggle of young children played around and under the tables, and among them was a young cousin of Miriam named Tirtza. By one of those strange chances of history our ways were to cross again in Ghana some fifteen years later, when her husband, Nehemia Levtzion, came to work at the Institute of African Studies.

Miriam’s café was truly a haven. We felt physically safe there, and indeed in Nesher generally. There was a sense of community in the village, everyone seemingly knowing everyone else. Many of the inhabitants had left Russia at the time of the third aliyah, the

“return” of 1918-22. Most of the men worked at the cement works. They prided themselves on being politically on the left, though they were social democrats rather than socialists. They were of course Zionists but, unlike such adherents of the Hashomer Hatzza’ir movement as David and Avram, appeared to want a Jewish rather than a bi-national state. They were universally hostile to the Irgun and the Stern Gang, both of which they regarded as right wing. There was not a single supporter of these extremist organizations living in Nesher, they insisted, and I had no reason to doubt them. And as for the missing jerricans, we never did find out who had appropriated them, but nor did their disappearance ever figure in our reports to C.RASC.

It was at Miriam’s café that I first heard of the Seven Sisters. Their story gave me a sense of the history of the Nesher community into the affairs of which I was being drawn. It was perhaps because of the moral impact of its message that it had become part of the popular culture of Nesher. The story has been told me several times, and the version below has, I hope, a reasonable degree of accuracy.

Miriam had many cousins in Russia. Their mothers all became orphaned. It was like this. There were seven sisters and two brothers. Their father was killed in a pogrom there in or about the year 1907. One of the brothers was killed at the same time. Then their mother died. The surviving brother was the baby of the family. The eldest of the eight surviving children was a daughter. She was only 22 years old. It was unsafe to stay in Russia, so she announced that she and her sisters and brother would go to Palestine. Everyone told her that it was impossible, that Palestine was no more than a dream. She said that she would make the dream come true. The eight of them set off on the road. Sometimes they walked and sometimes they hitched rides. Whenever they could they did a little work, like washing clothes or sewing, and so earned enough money to continue the journey. They crossed the frontier into Romania. They knew they had an uncle there, and they managed to find him. He took them into his home, and said that they should remain with him. They did so. They were very tired.

After some time the uncle said that he wanted to send some of the younger daughters and the brother to America where they could go to school. The eldest sister would not agree. She said that the family must not be broken up. They worked and saved, and somehow they got together enough money to get themselves tickets on a ship bound for Palestine. They arrived there in 1921. About this time the Nesher Cement Works were being built. Michael Pollack started them. He had been a big business man in Russia, and his investments in oil had made him a millionaire. He lost almost everything when the Bolsheviks seized power, but fortunately he owned some tankers that were then at sea. These were sold, and he used the money to build the works.

Many people were settling in Nesher. They were mostly from Russia. So the eldest sister went to the works. She obtained permission from the managers to open a canteen. This was not at the main site, but at the old quarry on the mountain road. Most of the sisters married men from the works, but Miriam’s mother married a cook. He had also fled from Russia, and found his way to Switzerland where he learned to cook. He became a Zionist, because so many Zionist congresses were held in Switzerland, and applied to the Jewish Agency for assistance to migrate to Palestine. He was asked, “What is the hurry?” They told him that he was a young man, and there was plenty of time for him to migrate to Palestine and find himself a Jewish girl to marry. But he was indeed in a hurry. Somehow he managed to convince the Agency that he was the sort of skilled worker needed in Palestine, and he was able to join a group of artisans being sent there. Then he married Miriam’s mother. Together they ran the canteen at the quarry. It was so successful that in time they were able to close it, and open a larger café in Nesher itself. All the sisters spoke Yiddish. Their children were born in Palestine, and were proud of being sabras. There were differences between them, however. The children of the older sisters, like Miriam herself, grew up speaking Yiddish. But the children of the younger sisters, like Tirtza, learned Hebrew at school. It became their first language, and they forgot Yiddish.

CHAPTER 3

LATE JANUARY 1948

Transjordan Frontier Force

On the morning of 15 January the detachment of the Transjordan Frontier Force pulled out of Nesher Camp. I watched and photographed the evacuation. This was a matter of sheer curiosity on my part for the unit played no regular role in our operations. Their trucks moved off to the south, being eased by their drivers into the heavy traffic that was passing Nesher Camp. Heavy traffic? The diary entry for that day describes the situation.

Many Arabs are now beginning to leave the Jewish areas. Along the road from Haifa to the mountains there is a steady stream of refugees. Some travel in huge American cars, horns blowing loudly, their bundles of goods strapped on to the roofs. These are the landowners, the merchants, and the officials. But also there are the donkeys overloaded with every conceivable item of household equipment, and men and women bent almost double under huge loads carried on their heads. These, the rule rather than the exception, are the workers and peasants of Palestine.

There was no way that I could guess at the magnitude of the exodus in progress (though recent studies have suggested that by late January over a quarter of Haifa's 70,000 Arabs had already fled the town).

That afternoon I spent some time in Nesher with Praff and some of his friends I had not met before. I said that they must be pleased to see the Transjordan Frontier Force withdrawing. To my surprise, they became quite angry. As was so often the case, they were better informed than I was. The Frontier Force, they said, was not part of the Arab Legion, but was under the authority of the High Commissioner of Palestine who had announced that it was going to be disbanded. So it was being sent to Transjordan for that purpose. Why did I think that was being done, they asked me? I expressed my bewilderment. All it meant, they said, was that one day the Frontier Force was under King George of England and the next day under King Abdullah of Transjordan who would take over everything, well-trained soldiers and their weapons, armoured cars, stores, everything. The British were using the so-called "disbanding" as just another stratagem for strengthening the Arabs.

My attempt to disclaim any personal responsibility for Britain's perfidy seemed not to work. There were still two companies of the Arab Legion in Nesher Camp, they pointed out, as if this certainly demonstrated my complicity in some grand plot. When are they going to be pulled out, I was asked? I had absolutely no idea. The trouble was that I was largely in agreement with my inquisitors. My diary reads:

The Jews of Nesher do not like the presence there of the Legion, and point out that while we actually use the Legion we still refuse to give even legal recognition to Haganah. Yet, they say, the area of Haifa is within what will become the Jewish State. Without building up Haganah, they ask, how can they avoid massacres of the Jews when the British troops are evacuated? It is difficult not to see their point.

It was later that day that I saw the Palestine Post, and realized just why I had, for the first time, been received in Nesher with something approaching hostility. "Britain will keep on arming Arabs," was the headline. I copied the text into the diary:

London, Wednesday – Britain will continue to fulfil her contracts to sell arms and military equipment to certain Arab states despite their announced threats to march against Palestine after the British Mandate ends, a Foreign Office spokesman said today....

No Foreign Office official will openly discuss what Britain will do if Arab League States carry out their threat to move against the Jews in Palestine once the British Mandate ends. They refer to such a situation as "hypothetical," and they discount

the seriousness of secret decisions taken in Beirut on October 9 by the Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Egyptian and Trans-Jordan Prime Ministers. The Arab leaders announced after this meeting that they were resolved to take "specific military action" and to mobilize all possible military aid to meet the "Jewish threat"....

I think Praff rather regretted my having been made the target of his friends' ire. On 18 January he telephoned, and persuaded me once again to join him on the mountain road patrol. I had appeared so happy at escaping from camp, he said, that we should do it again. I could scarcely spurn so conciliatory an approach. The view from the top was, if anything, even clearer, and Praff spotted what he proclaimed to be the ruins of a Crusader castle, Chateau des Pelerins. Again we found no signs of the road having been mined, but Praff made me more fully aware of its possible importance to the Haganah strategists. Five days earlier I had written, "in Balad esh-Sheikh they seem to be creating a post on one of the rooftops overlooking the road and railway. This could cut Nesher – and the Cement Works – off from Haifa." Now I came to realize that in the event of Arab irregulars closing passage through Balad esh-Sheikh to Jewish traffic, Nesher (and its Cement Works) might be able to maintain contact with Haifa (and its port) by way of the mountain road.

Petrol: Dippers and Tappers

It was not felt that 376 Petrol Platoon as such was in any way threatened by a road block being established at Balad esh-Sheikh since it was known that Arab irregulars were strictly forbidden to interfere in any way with British military activities; nothing should delay the termination of the Mandate. Nevertheless, McClenahan and I were considerably alarmed by the signs of unusual activity in Balad esh-Sheikh that we saw (or more accurately heard) in the course of our nightly visits to the platoon's petrol tanks along the Wadi el-Tabel. The diary entry for 18 January describes the situation as I saw it at the time:

[Last night] I went into Balad esh-Sheikh. Over the last three days both road and rail traffic has been subjected to machine gun fire from the town. They say that they are turning the town into a strong point – and I suspect that Syrian forces have moved in although they will not admit to that. They say that when I want to drive through the town at night – which I have to do to check the petrol tanks in the early hours of the morning – I should flick my lights and drive very slowly. Message received! They pointed out that at this place they now control one of the three main roads out of Haifa and one of the three railways. I shall be surprised if Haganah does not attack Balad esh-Sheikh again shortly.

Most of this information was related to me through Mohammed. I asked him who were the "they" of his account? He was uneasy about my question. He said that he didn't really know but that the people of the town thought that what was going on would bring them nothing but trouble. I told Mohammed that it was already bringing me trouble, and that I was becoming more and more worried about driving through Balad esh-Sheikh at night, when I could hear the sound of rifles being cocked on the rooftops. On a moonlit night, I said, I could also see two or three Jewish pillboxes on the hillside beyond the ravine, and heard similar noises from those tiny emplacements. Mohammed scarcely reassured me greatly when he pointed out that everything is in the hands of Allah. I told Mohammed that in order to set my mind at rest he should arrange for me to meet some of "the men" in person. Mohammed returned to Balad esh-Sheikh immediately, and was able to arrange a meeting there after the evening prayer.

The men I met were three in number. They carried Sten guns and rifles. There was no exchange of courtesies. Mohammed was obviously very ill at ease and I don't think I did a very good job in concealing my own nervousness. The men spoke in Arabic and Mohammed interpreted. They told me what I should do when visiting the tanks if I did not want to get shot. I didn't. I took their advice seriously, as my diary for 19 January testifies:

2 a.m. I am just back from Balad esh-Sheikh. I did indeed flick my lights and drive slowly – to the sound of safety catches being clicked off and bullets put into chambers. I am not so keen on this at all! I am sure the Syrians have taken over the town.

Many years later I was to meet someone who had witnessed my arrival at the tanks from the Nesher side. “We used to see you go there every night,” David Schvit said. “We had three pillboxes. One of them was above your tanks. Because of you we used to know where the Arabs were. Like you, we could hear the Arabs cocking their guns.”

My diary entry for 20 January drew attention to the platoon’s losses of petrol

It is becoming very clear that Army policy here is to prevent Haganah from expanding, but to allow Arab groups into Palestine. We are losing thousands of gallons of petrol a day, between the tanks on the hills and the installations. Clearly the pipeline is being tapped in Balad esh-Sheikh, presumably to create stores for the Syrian and other groups. We have asked H.Q. in Haifa for infantry to patrol the line - since we cannot use our Arab Legion men for this. But no reply.

The Arabs tapped the pipes and McClenahan I dipped the tanks. We had no clear picture of how and where the tapping was carried out, but we did know how to do the dipping. It was by no means a simple operation, and had to be carried out in the dead of night, when the temperature of the petrol in the tanks was at its lowest. It was C.RASC rather than Webster who had issued the order assigning the dipping to 2nd Lts. McClenahan and Wilks. It involved first of all, the tense drive through Balad esh-Sheikh to the tanks in Wadi el-Tabel above the town. Here men of the 1st Security Company of the Arab Legion, who guarded the tanks, met us. I rather liked the way that they sometimes saluted us first, then challenged us (“Who goes there?”), and then doze off while we went about our (to them incomprehensible) business.

Our task was the simple one of determining the amount of petrol in each tank. The accomplishment of this, however, was far from simple, for the expansion and contraction of the fuel with temperature varied (perversely) with the specific gravity of the particular consignment from the refineries. Petrol had to be taken from each tank using a sampling can, and its specific gravity determined with a hydrometer. Each tank had then to be dipped and the readings on the dip-tapes converted, by the use of Tank Table for each tank, from inches and feet to volumes in gallons. The temperature of the petrol in each tank was then determined with the use of a deep-cup-case thermometer. Finally a Table of Specific Gravity Correction Coefficients was used to cross-refer to a Table of Volume Correction Coefficients, so giving us a final figure for the current amount of petrol in each tank. McClenahan or I, as the case may be, then got to bed but for a few hours only for the figures had to be presented to the platoon’s Chief Clerk by 6.30 a.m. He too had been busy overnight working on the vouchers signed by all those who had drawn petrol from the installations the previous day. The readings from the tanks and those from the vouchers had then to be taken to C.RASC, Haifa. There, using elementary arithmetic, it was determined whether 376 Petrol Platoon’s books balanced, that is, whether the quantity of petrol drawn from the tanks and the quantity dispensed at the installations were commensurate. There was never an exact correspondence, however, and the clerks at C.RASC applied standard corrections to the platoon’s figures to allow for evaporation, leakage, and unavoidable spillage, but even so there were often quite astonishing discrepancies sometimes amounting to several thousand gallons a day.

It was in such circumstances that Major Williams, second-in-command to C.RASC, instructed Webster to reprimand 2nd Lts. McClenahan and Wilks for dipping the tanks carelessly! We talked the matter over and Webster accepted our assurances that we had not been remiss. We said that in our opinion the only explanation for the losses of petrol was that the pipeline, running as it did from our tanks at Wadi el-Tabel through Balad esh-Sheikh to the installations, was being tapped. We expressed our strong belief that a search of Balad esh-Sheikh should be made. The problem was that 376 Petrol Platoon as such had no capacity for any such operation, and although the 1st Security Company of the Arab Legion

guarded our tanks, we knew that it could not be used in a hostile move against an Arab town. Webster said that he would make a formal request for assistance. He would not reprimand us, he told his two subalterns (good for him, we thought) but he would have to tell C.RASC that he had done so (*****), we muttered). McClenahan and I indulged ourselves in a little speculation. Webster's request for help would, of course, be ignored. Major Williams had made some sort of deal, with whom we did not guess, to turn a blind eye to taps on the pipeline and covered himself by discrediting any supposed losses as illusory, the result of the incompetence of two junior subalterns. The Arab irregulars were thus enabled to obtain a useful supply of petrol and Williams got what? We were charitable and decided that he might be one of those strongly pro-Arab officers of his generation who was acting in accord with his conscience. We even savoured the irony of a situation in which Williams and Webster were turning blind eyes to the loss, respectively, of petrol to Arabs and jerricans to Jews. All such speculations seemed in need of review when, on 22 January, Balad esh-Sheikh was raided.

Webster received no advance notice of the proposed raid. No one involved in planning it had approached the two subalterns who had regularly to pass through Balad esh-Sheikh. No one in Nesher Camp was informed either that a raid was projected, was in progress, or had ended. So complete was the blanket of secrecy that I knew nothing about it until several days later, when some of the platoon's labourers first told me about it. Their accounts made it clear that it was carried out by armoured cars, and I guessed that these would have belonged to a squadron of the 3rd Hussars, or correctly, 3rd The King's Own Hussars, 6th Airborne Division. I assumed that the raid was in response to our request for help on 20 January, and that the troops were looking for taps on the pipeline. The labourers said that this was not the case. The soldiers were looking for guns, and had arrested two Arabs who had rifles and a Bren gun. We discussed the affair over breakfast the next morning. Had the 6th Airborne Division decided to destroy the strongpoint that the irregulars were establishing in Balad esh-Sheikh? That, we thought, seemed unlikely granted the brevity of the operation and the capture of only two men. It was quite obvious that the raid had nothing to do with the pipeline. We later learned that only a few days before the raid 10,000 rounds of ammunition had been stolen from 6th Airborne Division headquarters. It seemed reasonable to assume that the Division had reason to think that irregulars in Balad esh-Sheikh were involved in the theft. Be that as it may, Webster was furious about the whole affair. He thought it unconscionable that we had been given no warning of the raid and all the more so since we depended on Balad esh-Sheikh for much of our labour. As for McClenahan and me, we had been dipping the tanks at night quite unaware that our supposed brothers-in-arms had exposed us to Arab retaliation.

General Staff, Intelligence

In the course of the first half of January I had become sure that a unit of Arab irregulars had moved into Balad esh-Sheikh, and I presumed that its members were responsible for our heavy losses of petrol. I decided to see whether the platoon had files that might throw light on Arab dissidents in Balad esh-Sheikh. The platoon appeared devoid of records other than several files of correspondence with C.RASC and trays containing material awaiting action. There was, however, one locked cabinet and I asked the Chief Clerk about it. Apparently only the Commanding Officer could authorize access to it. "Haven't a clue what's in it," Webster said, "but go ahead and take a look." For the most part the cabinet had been used to store correspondence of a private nature having to do with personnel matters, but one document was of great interest. It was a secret report from General Intelligence, Staff (henceforth GSI) in Jerusalem that had reached the platoon in mid- to late- December 1947 and, to judge from its not having been initialled, had been filed unread. It revealed that by late 1947 British Intelligence was aware that a special force was being created, dedicated to the establishment of Palestine as an independent state and member of the Arab League. Information was apparently culled from no more esoteric a source than a Damascus newspaper, and was to the effect that "suicide and storm squads" were being recruited for one or other of the Haj Amin el-Husseini, Fawzi el-Kawukji, and Salvation Divisions. This was, needless to say, not only extremely interesting but also potentially useful information.

The cabinet had more to yield. It contained several early numbers of classified ("secret") documents known as Intelligence Summaries that still arrived at the platoon from time to time. Summary No. 1 was based on information received up to 21 November 1947. It provided insight into the beginnings of what was becoming known as the Arab (or alternatively, Palestine) Liberation Army. Fawzi el-Kawukji, the report had it, "was a Guerilla leader in the '36' rising and was originally reported as being selected for Field Force Commander if a combined Arab force was constituted." This condition was met when the Syrian President committed his country to the defence of Arab Palestine, and the Arab League sponsored recruiting centres in Syria and Lebanon to enlist men "for the cause." Meanwhile Haj Amin el-Husseini called his followers (including a number of Arab nationalists from Haifa) to a meeting in the Lebanon, and made known his claim, by virtue of his status as Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, to the leadership of any movement for the defence of Arab Palestine. "He would appear," so Summary No.1 put it, "to regard Fawazi Kawaji's personal ambitions with some nervousness and intends to keep him in a subordinate position and well under control."

The cabinet's Intelligence Summary No. 2 (information received up to 4 December) had little to report and acknowledged it in just those words. "It would appear," Summary No. 3 (to 11 December) reported, "that the Palestine Arabs are only half-hearted in their denouncement of partition." Those who compiled Summary No. 4 (to 29 December) seem to have had little of significance to report on Arab affairs and used a good news and bad news approach. The good news was that "the Arabs do not appear to be intentionally killing members of the security forces;" the bad news, "but are snatching weapons at every possible opportunity." The bad news, "the Arabs are erecting their own road blocks on roads throughout Palestine;" the good news, "they are removed as soon as Police or military arrive in strength." I noticed that this summary was signed by Webster and myself, and had obviously been dutifully filed by the Chief Clerk. I thought that the paucity of information on Palestinian Arab affairs for most of December may have been the very factor that led to the dispatch of a special agent on a fact-finding mission to certain Arab League countries perhaps in December but certainly in January. To take up this story I shall have to go back to the beginning of January when, early one afternoon, the Sergeant of the Guard at the main gate of Nesher Camp appeared at 376 Petrol Platoon's office. He was escorting a man who insisted on seeing the officer in charge. Webster appeared.

Webster and the visitor spoke privately after which the former ordered a tent to be prepared for the visitor. The man carried, I gathered, a letter from GSI instructing all army units to provide the bearer with accommodation and mess facilities on request. At a guess the man was in his late fifties. He wore a well-cut suit, spoke impeccable English and, so far as we could judge from his conversation with Jad Mohammed, fluent Arabic. He joined us for drinks and dinner. Jad Mohammed positively doted on him. We were unsure whether our guest was British, deeply tanned by the sun, or perhaps (as I thought) Lebanese. We did not feel it polite to enquire into this.

Our visitor was quite talkative about the Arabic language and chided us for not knowing it. He spoke interestingly, even lovingly, about Islam, but in a way that led us to think that he was not himself a Muslim. He was not very responsive to our questions, but he did tell us that he had just come from Damascus. We asked him about Arab League politics. Did he think the Arab states would invade Palestine after the Mandate ended? He did not answer. I mentioned the Balad esh-Sheikh irregulars and asked him if he thought there were many such groups in Palestine. "You'll know all you need to know about that in due course," he said enigmatically. In my diary I observed, "He seemed a very sinister character." I also noted that I understood him to have implied, with reference to my question on Balad esh-Sheikh, that "many Arab guerillas are being infiltrated from the north."

Our visitor did not appear at breakfast and we learned that one of our drivers had already taken him to Headquarters, North Palestine District, en route for Jerusalem. McClenahan and I mulled over the matter. We decided that he was a special agent of some sort, that he had been gathering information in the Arab states, and that he was on his way to report to GSI in Jerusalem. So we had found ourselves a spy of sorts (as if we needed a little excitement in

life), and one who chose to make use of small camps like ours in order, so we assumed, to preserve his anonymity!

As it turned out McClenahan and I were not far wrong in our speculations. On the afternoon of 21 January a document of that date was delivered to the platoon. It was distributed by North Palestine District to all units on Lists E and F (to one of which categories we obviously belonged). It was coded "SECRET HSD/220/G(Int)," indicating that it originated from General Staff, Intelligence, Jerusalem. It read, "INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY No. 5 based on information received up to 15 January 48," with the proviso, "Some of the following infm [information] has not yet been confirmed." When McClenahan and I read the report we realized immediately just what our visitor early in the month had meant by his cryptic response to my question about Arab irregulars: "You'll know all you need to know about that in due course." We assumed that the agent's debriefing was completed by 15 January and that the report was then prepared by staff at GSI for limited distribution.

Intelligence Summary No. 5 was extraordinarily informative, and enabled events in Balad esh-Sheikh to be seen against the wider perspective of Arab guerilla infiltration. I incorporated the section headed "Arab Affairs – External" into the diary. It well conveys the reality of the mid-January situation and merits quotation at length.

(a) First course of approx 300 students passed out of a Training School in guerilla warfare at Qatana near Damascus. These students, now in Palestine are being used as organisers and instructors. The second course of approx 700 is expected, on passing out, to enter Palestine with an operational role.

(b) On or about 28 Dec 47 approx 600 Egyptian soldiers with their officers arrived at Damascus to join the Arab Army.

(c) Palestine recruits are also being trained at Adanna Military Camp, they are not given any rank on completion of the course for fear of arousing jealousy and discontent. They are however given "paybooks" which contain the course results.

(d) Fawzi Kaukji is generally believed to be the leader of the Syrian and Transjordan Arab Volunteer Force, loosely known as the "Palestine Liberation Army". His Headquarters for operations in the Huleh area is reported as being at Banias 215214 just inside Syria. He has visited Arab notables in the Nabulus area on several occasions.

(e) A reliable source states that Syrian Army Officers are preparing for skirmishes on the Palestine border. The Syrian Government would later apologize to HMG [His Majesty's Government] on the grounds of youth and irresponsibility. Some 500 volunteers, it is reported, are concentrating in the Homs area. Several Syrian Army Officers have been given permission to resign their commissions and have joined the irregulars. It is thought that a lively performance will be given on the word go.

(f) Small parties of gunmen have infiltrated into Palestine from Syria and the Lebanon, their main job is to protect Arab villages and Arab quarters in the towns. Amongst them are Abdul Qadir Hussein leader of the clandestine "Arab National Guard" and Sheikh Hassan Salameh, ex Nazi parachutist and expert saboteur who are now commanding the Arab underground forces in the Jaffa area.

(g) Haifa Police report that 200 partly trained men arrived in Haifa from Syria and are being billeted at H.Q. Ittisam Society. They will be used for the defence of the Arab quarters in the town assisted by the Ittisam Society. Amongst the party are bomb experts and street fighters, mainly volunteers from the neighbouring countries, but also include Turkish and German ex prisoners of war. They will carry out reprisals against the Jewish bomb outrages which are anticipated in the near future.

(h) Reports from the Transjordan Frontier Force and Police state that approx 200 members of the Palestine Liberation Army are entering Palestine about every 3 weeks. Their intention is to concentrate in the Safad and Acre sub districts near the frontier. Reports state that the last party crossed the frontier on 7 Jan and that the rest, which may be as large as 600 is expected within the next few weeks. All that have come over so far are concentrated in Tarshiha 175268 and Suhmata 178267 with a detachment at Al Bassa (of approx 200). The Tarshiha band of approx 600 is said to be commanded by a German officer, the Suhmata band of about 400 by a

Turk. They are said to be well armed and equipped; they are paid approx ,P[alestine] 18 a month which includes an increment for service in Palestine.
(i) It is reported that about 600 commando trained Circassians are in the Syria-Marjoun area. They are paid ,S[yria] 100 (about ,P 15) a month, to be increased to ,S 150 when ordered into Palestine.

Careful reading of Intelligence Summary No. 5 led me to believe that I was right in thinking that most of the irregulars in Balad esh-Sheikh were Syrian, that they were a unit or detachment of the Arab (or Palestine) Liberation Army, and that their leader was most likely Fawzi el-Kawukji ['Fawzi Kaukji'].

Field Security

It is possible that General Staff, Intelligence had information that for whatever reason did not appear in those Intelligence Summaries cleared for limited distribution and that 376 Petrol Platoon was not one of the favoured units. At the time, however, I thought this unlikely granted the assumption that the platoon would have a critical role to play in maintaining the fuel supplies of an army in the process of disengagement. McClenahan and I noted that tight control of the immigration of Jewish refugees from Europe into Palestine was rigorously enforced, but that the infiltration of Arab irregulars into the country was tolerated if not ignored altogether. By reason of our nightly visits to the petrol tanks above Balad esh-Sheikh we had knowledge of the town that had to be of interest to police and military Intelligence. No one from either ever consulted us on such matters. We had no files in Nesher Camp that provided information on the social, economic, and political circumstances of either Nesher or Balad esh-Sheikh, nor had C.RASC in Haifa as far as we could find out. We were therefore left to whistle in the dark in situations that were often difficult and sometimes downright dangerous. We had been obliged to make our own contacts and to learn from them whatever we could.

I knew that a unit of Haganah's Guard Force had been formed in Nesher, and I understood the importance of keeping open the mountain road. I also knew that irregulars of the Arab (or Palestine) Liberation Army in Balad esh-Sheikh intended to establish control over both road and railway at that point. Again, the extraordinary thing was that no attempt was made by British Intelligence to access such locally generated information, whether by army Intelligence or by the Political Branch of the Palestine Police. I was coming to believe that a failure of intelligence had much to do with the chaos of the last months of the Mandate.

Haganah intelligence was undoubtedly more efficient than British. I had not been long in Palestine before I realized that my Jewish acquaintances displayed an intense curiosity about my upbringing, my political beliefs and my army life. I had no doubt that some of what they learned found its way into Haganah's files. I did not feel any sense of being duped; indeed, those with whom I talked often reciprocated by telling me much about themselves. I came to count some of them as good friends who enjoyed my company as much as I did theirs. We came to trust each other. I was appalled by British policy in Palestine and very deeply troubled by the situation in which the Jews found themselves. I was quite open about this. Indeed, there were times when I volunteered information that I thought might be of use to them. Knowing, for example, Nesher's fear that the mountain road might be mined, I did not hesitate to pass on anything I could learn about the arrival in Palestine of experts on explosives.

A British army camp usually had a security officer who was made available by one of its component units. A camp security officer liaised with his local Field Security Section the staff of which was drawn from the Army Intelligence Corps. It was with considerable interest that I read a report by 317 Field Security Section for the week ending 21 January that paid a remarkable tribute to Haganah Intelligence:

Recent and closer contact with Haganah during the past week has disclosed the alarming degree of efficiency of their Intelligence organisations.... A great advantage which their Intelligence organisations have over ours is the fact that their sources

can be either highly paid, blackmailed or threatened, and that they have a large clerical staff of women for the purpose of collating the information they receive and for distributing it to the action addressees. All Jews may be called upon to act as sources and all are willing to do so. There is no tendency, as we find in the British Army, to sit on information, and Haganah Intelligence organisations meet an immediate and enthusiastic response when they ask, for example, for the life histories of anti and pro-Jewish Englishmen; this subject frequently fills the first page in any dossier.

I was much amused by another item in the same report:

It has become apparent that some members of illegal Intelligence organisations have been introducing themselves, particularly to British officers, as neutral or impartial persons, for the purpose of winning their confidence and extracting information. Two officers were overheard, for example, talking freely on military matters to a Jew whom we knew to be a member of an illegal organisation. Both of these officers were completely lacking in suspicion owing to the quantity of drink which they had consumed and to the general hilarious tone of the party. The conversation was fortunately overheard by a person connected with this Section and the matter has since been dealt with.

I felt a certain sympathy with those two bibulous officers, and hoped that they were not dealt with too severely. I did, however, have some personal uneasiness about the modus operandi of the Field Security Sections. The Nesher Camp security officer at the time of my arrival was a Lt. Kenyon who was also then temporarily in command of 376 Petrol Platoon (awaiting Webster's arrival). He was, then, at the Christmas Party when I first met Valentina and would surely have known of my first visit to her in Haifa. Was a camp security officer expected to report such matters to this local Field Section? This I did not know, and did not worry much about it until, that is, 22 January when an unfortunate incident occurred. Kenyon arrived at the mess in the early evening. He was very drunk, and we learned that he had been informed that morning of his promotion to captain with effect from the 26th. Now, arms were not allowed to be taken into the mess but had to be left with the corporal who manned the entrance hall. Kenyon ignored the rule, staggered in, ordered a double whisky, and began to brandish his revolver as if he were a lawman, or for that matter a bandit, of the old American Wild West (as we knew it from innumerable films). I hit him quite hard indeed, and took away his gun. I did so assuming that he had followed our customary practice of not loading the first chamber. I remember that his pipe slid across the polished floor and, quite absurdly, worrying lest it had broken. I don't think the incident was ever brought to the attention of Webster, and it was not in the interests of either of us that it should be. As it happened Kenyon was transferred a few days later to 4 Petrol Station Company, so we no longer shared a mess. I feared, however, that I could not rely on Kenyon to turn a blind eye to my irregular trips to Haifa. In fact I need not have worried; he behaved like the gentleman he undoubtedly was.

Table Talk

When the installations were closed down because of the midday heat, and I was not duty officer, I was able to spend some afternoons in Haifa with Valentina. It was a drive of about twenty minutes from Nesher Camp to Hadar Hacarmel, where she lived. One of the platoon drivers would drop me there at about 12.30, and collect me several hours later. I reciprocated by providing him with two or three bottles of beer for the evening. Valentina lived on the second floor of a block of flats. A janitor, another former British Army man, inspected all visitors. It was a rule of the building that if any of them was carrying arms, these were to be deposited in the small cupboard under his, the janitor's, counter. The first time I went through this procedure I was very apprehensive, and the janitor spotted this. "What gun?" he asked, when I went to retrieve it on my departure. The court-martial that awaited me, and the return to Britain in disgrace.... Such things were flashing through my mind when the janitor handed the Colt over to me with a smile. I was relieved but not amused. Disencumbered of

my gun, I had only to slip off my epaulettes and pull my shirt over my trousers to pass as a civilian in a town where so many people wore ex-army clothes. In this way Valentina and I were able to walk about the town without attracting attention. I felt completely safe, which was probably rather foolish for recent Intelligence Summaries had contained repeated warnings that IZL and the Stern Gang were planning a new campaign of hit-and-run assassinations.

Valentina had many friends. We would sit around a shaded table on a traffic-free street and, over beer and wine, talk of literature, art, history, and most of all, politics. Those who joined the table seemed all to belong to Haganah, and came quite openly to acknowledge the fact. David of Mishmar Ha'emek was a regular, though I never met Avram again. One afternoon – it was 22 January and after the fracas with Kenyon – I joined David at the usual table. I greatly needed to clear my mind on a number of issues. I told David about the matter of the platoon's stolen jerricans and gave him an account of my meeting with Schnitlander at the Nesher Cement Works. I said that I had told Feldinger that my superior officer had expressed his willingness to assist the Jews but that as far as I knew no attempt had been made contact him to clarify the matter. It was not David who replied but another man at the table to whom I had not been introduced and indeed never was. There was nothing to worry about, he said. Schnitlander had to be careful because weapons were being made in the cement works. I was not a little surprised that I was told this. Needless to say, I did not enter the information in the diary.

David turned the conversation to Balad esh-Sheikh. What was going on there, he asked? I described my meeting with the three Arabs, and said that I was sure that a unit of irregulars had established itself in the town. David said that similar reports had been received from Tira, just a few miles south of Haifa on the road to Tel Aviv. Not just small arms but mortar fire had been directed on Jewish vehicles passing the town. He, David, was sure that the Arab strategy was to encircle Haifa on all but the sea side, by cutting the roads leading to it. I asked whether Haganah was strong enough to prevent this happening. David replied to the effect that if such Arab towns as Tira and Balad esh-Sheikh were to be attacked, then British troops would inevitably be thrown in against the Jews. The Haganah commanders did not want this to happen, so at the present time great efforts were being made to bulletproof as many Jewish buses and trucks as possible in order to be able to keep lines of communication open. I had in fact seen a few such armour-plated vehicles trundling their way past Balad esh-Sheikh; one would like to say hurtling past, but trundling it quite definitely was. Due to the sheer weight of iron and steel welded on to them, the maximum speed of these behemoths did not exceed 20 or 25 mph, and the driver's vision was restricted to whatever could be seen through a slit only a few inches high.

David was in a particularly talkative mood so I decided to ask him more about his settlement, Mishmar Ha'emek. It was about 18 miles from Haifa on the Jenin road, he said, and was founded in 1926. Most of the land was marsh at that time and malaria was a terrible problem. The settlement was developed as a true collectivity or kibbutz, that is, the land and all property belong to the settlement as such. An Executive Council, drawn from the members, made all major decisions, and a number of committees were responsible for different spheres of activity. For example, David said, his wife lives on the kibbutz, and she works on the Health Committee. They have two young children who lived in the nursery. "What about you," I asked David? He said that he was on temporary leave, though he visited Mishmar Ha'emek regularly. "Why," I asked. "Well, to see my wife and children there," he replied. "No," I said, "I meant why are you on leave?" He smiled. "I think you know the answer to that by now," he replied. I think I did. I had become fairly sure that David was serving full-time in Haganah. I told him that someone had said that during the war a training center for the elite Haganah fighting force known as Palmach had been established at Mishmar Ha'emek. David said that he knew nothing about that, but the settlement was proud of having become one of the leading educational centres for Hashomer Hatza'ir. I thought it best not to press the matter further, and asked about the settlement's size. David said that about 400 people currently lived in Mishmar Ha'emek and that about 5,000 acres were

farmed. As we talked we little thought that a few weeks later the settlement would capture the newspaper headlines day after day.

It was late afternoon and only David, Valentina and I remained at the table. We had consumed enough wine to become garrulous but by no means drunk. David went into a rather rambling discourse only the general thrust of which I can remember. "We are all socialists," he said, "and we know that the Jewish and Arab workers in Palestine have the same class interests." I thought I knew him well enough to play devil's advocate. The Jewish workers, I suggested, enjoyed much better rates of pay and conditions of service than the Arab. "That," he said, "is because you British need our skills in order to rule Palestine, and you pay us for that." I muttered something about from each according to his abilities and to each according to his needs. "When the British leave Palestine," David said, "then Jews and Arabs will be able to work together as equals." I expressed doubts. "Arabs and Jews might be politically equal under the constitution of a bi-national state," I said, "but because of their lack of technical skills most Arabs will be mainly working class and the Jews mainly middle class." David and I were becoming rather angry at each other. Valentina, who seldom intervened in these conversations, did so on this occasion. "Ivor," she told David, "probably knows the Arab workers as well as you do by now." Modestly, I disclaimed this, though I wanted to tell her that she had made an excellent point! I did, after all, deal with them day in and day out.

David raised a new matter. Did I know, he said, that negotiations were in progress to create a united front of Hashomer Hatzair and other parties of the left? I asked him if these included the Palestine Communist Party. He said it did not. Was that because the majority of them were Arab, I asked? That, he replied, is not the point. I rather thought it was. Hashomer Hatzair and its political allies were in fact exclusively Jewish organizations. David shifted his ground. The real problem, he said, was that the Arab countries were threatening to invade Palestine once the British troops withdrew, and worse than that, the Arabs were being supplied with arms from Britain. Yet, David pointed out, the Jewish Agency was still unable to persuade the British administration to recognize Haganah as a legitimate defence force. Even in the highly trained Palmach units there were many men who still did not have so much as a rifle. I told David that he was preaching to the converted and that I agreed with him that the situation was extremely alarming. "Well, you are willing to be of help to us, aren't you?" he said. "Yes," I replied. I was unsure exactly what he had in mind. Since 376 Petrol Platoon had no surplus of weapons but an enormous one of jerricans, I assumed that it was the latter that were of interest to the Jews. David rose to leave. We shook hands perhaps a little less warmly than usual. He said that he would be out of town for a few days.

Tewfik

One day, for some reason I no longer remember, I did not have to be in camp for the evening work shift. Valentina and I strolled around the crowded streets bathed in light and sound. Late that night in my tent I jotted down a few notes, hoping to capture the gaiety and magic of the scene. Both eluded me:

Brightly lit shop windows.... Well-dressed people from all over Europe and Asia and America.... Noticed many girls in sleeveless frocks, with the ugly blue numbers of Dachau and Belsen tattooed on the forearm.... Yet there is tension among the crowds.... There have been too many shootings and bombings for it to be otherwise.... These people just cannot be driven out: they have nowhere to go.

Valentina and I wound our way down to the bookshop near the port. Tewfik was there again. I began to wonder whether he was its owner, and I do not know just what held me back from asking him. "Ah", he said, "Nesher Camp." I concurred. "Still think there was no massacre at Balad esh-Sheikh?" he asked. "There was no massacre there," I replied. I think that he was referring to workers from that town who had been murdered at the Consolidated Refineries in Haifa. He turned to Valentina. "Jewish?" he asked. "We are all Palestinians,"

she said. I liked her reply. So, obviously, did Tewfik. "A nice girl," he said to me, "You are lucky to have met her." I decided that my first unfavourable impressions of him were false. I came to like him. He in turn seemed to feel that he had a mission to ensure that I understood the Arab side of the Palestine situation. "The Arab side?" I asked.

The Arab League, Tewfik said, had only been created in March 1945 to coordinate the policy of the seven independent Arab states, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Transjordan, and Yemen. The Arab Higher Committee, sponsored by the Arab League claims to represent Arab political interests in Palestine. The Grand Mufti Haj Amin el-Husseini of Jerusalem and his close associate, Jemal Husseini, dominated the Arab Higher Committee, and in Arab League debates had opposed acceptance of the United Nations Partition plan. Although he, Tewfik, was also opposed to partition, he totally rejected the politics of the Arab Higher Committee. "It seems intent," he said (and I quote from the diary), "on building up anti-Jewish sentiment on racial lines, and on utilizing nationalistic propaganda to counteract growing class-consciousness on the part of the Arab workers' organizations." Since the bookshop was obviously a leftwing one, I asked him whether he supported the Palestine Communist Party. He used to, he said, but with a number of other Arab intellectuals had broken away in 1944 to form the NLL, the National Liberation League. He showed me the text of a memorandum the NLL had submitted to the United Nations. I made a copy of parts of it:

Arab-Jewish relations in Palestine have always been influenced and affected by imperialist policy, the policy of the Mandate. It is no exaggeration to say that the existing tension is the working of imperialist policy and imperialist agents in Palestine.... Zionism was destined to play a subservient political role to the Mandatory power in Palestine.... From the outset Jews were placed on a privileged level economically, politically, and socially.... The racial theories propagated by Zionism in Jewish schools have contributed greatly to the upbringing of an arrogant, aggressive, and chauvinist new generation, a manifestation of which is the terror reigning over Palestine now. Helped by these conditions created by the Mandatory power and Zionism, Arab reactionary elements succeeded in playing anti-Jewish feeling among the Arab population.

Unlike the Arab Higher Committee, Tewfik said, the NLL did not see the struggle as a nationalist one between Jews and Arabs. The future lay in Jewish and Arab cooperation, for Jewish and Arab workers had the same class interests. The Arab Workers' Congress, which was affiliated to the NLL, was now the strongest trade union in all the large towns, including Haifa. Tewfik then drew my attention in a copy of a newspaper, Al-Ittihad, dated 16 November 1947. He thought I might like to copy it also. I did.

Understanding between Arab and Jews was still made more difficult by the aggressive policy of Zionism towards the Arab population of the country. Reactionary leadership in the Arab national movement was definitely not interested in such an understanding.... There are strong and influential forces among both peoples who are most interested not only in antagonism, hatred, and feud, but in a bloody fight with the aim of dominating one people over the other.

While I had been busily copying passages for entry in the diary, Tewfik and Valentina conversed animatedly in Arabic. Feeling inadequate in such circumstances, I retired to the depths of the shop and browsed fiercely. Perhaps I felt a little jealous, for Tewfik was an impressive sort of person. When Valentina and I finally left the shop I asked what she and Tewfik had talked about. He told her about his experiences as a law student, she said, and that as an Arab he was opposed to Zionism but as a communist he was prepared to live in a Jewish state and work for peace. That night I scribbled in the diary what I thought to be the logic of Tewfik's argument: "thesis, the alliance of Imperialism and Zionism; anti-thesis, exploitation of the situation by Arab reactionaries; synthesis, the emergence of Arab-Jewish working class solidarity." I am sure that Tewfik would have given a very low mark for that,

but what I was trying to catch was the common factor in the views of Tewfik of the (Arab) National Liberation League and David of (Jewish) Hashomer Hatza'ir.

Webster

On 23 January Naftali Praff phoned me at lunchtime. A man had arrived at the Cement Works. He wanted to talk to Webster about something – I would know what. Could I arrange for Webster to meet this man immediately? No one else should be present.

Webster went to Nesher as soon as lunch was over. On his return an hour or so later he offered no account of the meeting. He simply told me that he had agreed to pass some of our “war surplus” over to Nesher. I thought his reticence very strange in the circumstances. Uncharitably, perhaps, I wondered whether he had negotiated some sort of deal with whomever he met. I never knew. Although we had developed a good working relationship, Webster remained something of an enigma to me. He was middle aged and cynical; I was young and (I suppose) idealistic. He had been serving in India when I was still a schoolboy. He lived, as he had told us, for the day of his demobilization, when he would return to his business and his yacht. I, by contrast, had no idea what life might have to offer after the army dispensed with my services, though I was increasingly coming to wonder whether Valentina might have a part in it. Be these things as they may, over the next few days Webster, McClenahan and I worked out a procedure by which we could divert a small but steady supply of empty jerricans from our installations to the Nesher Cement Works. Their disappearance from the many thousands in our stacks was quite unlikely to be noticed. In any case, as Webster cheerfully remarked, we could always have more “thefts” to cover any discrepancies in our books. Praff told me later that most of the cans were sent to Jerusalem, where Haganah forces were desperately short of virtually all supplies.

Nothing of Webster's 23 January meeting in Nesher is so much as hinted at in my diary. The entry for that day deals with more mundane matters:

Inflation here is incredible. We almost treble the wages of our Arab labourers by the addition of a cost of living bonus. An unskilled labourer gets 200 mils [£PI=1,000 mils] a day basic wage, but actually picks up 570. A rais has a basic wage of 370 mils a day, and picks up 888. But I can never see why the cost of living bonus should not be the same for all grades; they all have to face the same price increases. Deductions are made for union dues and so forth, and I think there is also some illegal deduction – a sort of protection racket by the timekeeper who could so easily get them sacked. As far as I can make out his deductions are fairly small, 10 mils or so off each. I am not sure whether to intervene in this matter or not. The protection they get might be worth the 10 mils! But it must be watched.

Balad esh-Sheikh

After dinner, on 29 January, McClenahan and I strolled down to the installations to cool off after the suffocating heat in the dining room. It was probably not long after 8 o'clock when we saw a flare fired from Balad esh-Sheikh. This was followed by several bursts of Bren gun fire that seemed to be directed against one of the Jewish concrete pillboxes above the highest stretch of Nesher Camp's perimeter. There was no return fire, but the silence was in some way more menacing than the shooting. We guessed that a few men of the Arab Liberation Army were working off some anger that night. We knew how they felt. We too were angry, and also much offended by the way with which the matter of the missing petrol had been totally ignored. Very well, we said, with those trigger-happy gunmen loose on the hill the tanks will simply not get dipped tonight. Over drinks in my tent McClenahan and I concocted a set of figures that would delight C.RASC the next day. We felt sure that only the totals would merit a glance, and that no one would notice that the occasional notation [EST] occurring among the detailed figures, that is, “estimates.”

The Birth of Mapam

From several North Palestine District intelligence reports that came to the platoon in the second half of January, and from conversations with David, I knew that there was something

of an upheaval in Jewish political alignments. I refer to “by far the most interesting development here for some time” in my diary entry for 27 January:

On the 24th Jewish left-wing groups merged. They are the Labour Unity group and the Hashomer Hatza'ir Poalei Zion. The new party is to be called Mifleget Hapoalim Hameuhedet, the United Workers' Party. This new party will be the second strongest among the Jews. At the elections to the last Zionist Congress the component groups polled 25% of the votes, compared with 35% to Mapai. To the Histadrut they polled 43% of the votes, compared with just over 50% to Mapai. The programme of the new party contains the following planks. 1. The independent nation is to forge its Socialist future by striving for a pact with the toiling Arab masses of the country. 2. The party sees itself as an inseparable part of the revolutionary workers' movement and the movement against capitalist-imperialist reaction. It will foster contact with revolutionary movements all over the world, and favours agreement between the workers of the world and the USSR, which is the first workers' state. 3. Complete equality and cooperation between the Jewish people returning to its land, and the Arab masses living there, will be sought. 4. Regarding the United Nations Organization decision, the Party will support the establishment of the Jewish State, and its defence under present conditions, despite its rejection in principle of Partition.

The new party rapidly became known as Mapam, linguistically echoing the name of Ben Gurion's Mapai while politically breaking with it.

I was much puzzled by how Haganah would receive the new party since it had been so closely aligned with Mapai. There was reason for my interest. According to a Field Security Section report of 21 January, Haganah and IZL were exploring the possibility of combining forces, and as a result the latter had temporarily suspended all operations against the British. I could not see the new party showing any enthusiasm for such a misalliance. When I asked Valentina about this she said that I should ask David when he returned to Haifa; he knew about such things. The way she spoke made me wonder whether David had himself taken part in recent political discussions. I realized how very little I knew about his current activities, pleasant and informative a drinking companion as he had been.

By mid-January I had become very aware of the contrasting approaches to the current situation displayed by Praff and his associates in Nesher on the one hand, and of David and his associates in Haifa on the other. “Zionism is a strangely polarized movement,” I had written on 19 January:

it has two very different faces, although some sort of united front occurs in times of crisis, as now. But talking to people from the two traditions, it is difficult to believe that they could ever find common ground.

With the advantage of hindsight my attempts to characterize the differences appear naïve, and may be read as period pieces. “The one tradition,” I wrote,

is religious in content, nationalistic in approach. “House of Jacob, let us arise and go forth” – the rallying cry. Its supporters feel strongly their membership of a “Chosen Race,” regard Palestine as the “National Home,” and therefore demand a Jewish State with a Jewish majority and the relegation of the Arabs to minor roles – but really desire their total expulsion from Palestine. They are financed largely from American Jewry. In practical terms they buy land, displace the Arab, and then proceed to develop it intensively. I think many of the Nesher people incline to see things this way.

I associated the growth of the other tradition with the great immigrations (“the second aliya”) that began in 1904. Those fleeing the pogroms in Russia included many who had been strongly influenced by the revolutionary socialist ideas current there, and they played a

crucial role in the full development of the collective settlements movement in Palestine. "Some groups within this tradition," I wrote,

have rejected Zionism completely, and politically are to be found in the ranks of the Jewish Communist Party. Other groups are represented within Hashomer Hatzair and, while remaining within the broad Zionist movement, advocate a bi-national state built upon Jewish-Arab cooperation.

My sympathies had obviously become engaged by this second tradition.

The situation is really a disturbing one. The British forces are not being used in any way to prevent the Arab build-up. But Haganah is still illegal and the Jews are not allowed to import arms. Perhaps what Britain fears most is the emergence of a socialist Jewish State....I cannot see how anything can now prevent the establishment of a Jewish State but its survival is another matter: unless it can achieve a build up of its defence forces or unless there is foreign intervention. If only the Jewish groups subscribing to the ideal of a bi-national state could be strengthened without at the same time necessarily strengthening the right-wing Zionists! I think many junior officers feel as I do. It is becoming very clear that Army policy here is to prevent Haganah from expanding, but to allow Arab groups into Palestine.

I had clearly developed a healthy dislike of anti-Arab Jewish racism and of anti-Jewish Arab racism. But I also entertained a deep suspicion of British policy towards Palestine. In the last diary entry for January I summarized, in broad terms, affairs as I saw them:

In general the situation here seems to be deteriorating rapidly. The British are slowly withdrawing all their forces into Jerusalem and Haifa, thus leaving the rural areas. South Palestine is more or less evacuated, and is being taken over by Arab guerillas. The Jewish areas are being highly organised for defence, but have great difficulty in obtaining adequate supplies of arms. In the Arab areas there seems to be considerable chaos. The guerillas are moving in, but it is difficult to know to what extent they are fully controlled by the Arab League. The League itself – in effect, the Husseinis – seems to be concentrating upon fomenting hate against the Jews, on encouraging raids against collective farms, railways, and the like, and in negotiating with King Abdullah. The Arab League still wants an Arab State of all-Palestine, whereas Abdullah wants to incorporate the Arab regions as per Partition Plan within Transjordan. The Jewish press favours the King not unnaturally, but British policy appears to favour the League. Why? First I think it is because it does not want to jeopardize its oil interests, which are not in Transjordan; and second, because it sees the Husseinis as a strong obstacle to the spread of Communism in the Middle East. But there are many factors in the case, and it is anticipated that the British Government will have to make an official pronouncement on the future of Arab Palestine in the near future.

"Many factors in the case," indeed! Little did I think, at the beginning of 1948, that more than 60 years later the fate of the Palestinian Arabs would still remain unresolved.

CHAPTER FOUR FEBRUARY 1948

Arms for Arabs

The installations were usually shut down on Sundays, which were days largely devoted to recovering from the effects of the traditional Saturday night binge. Early on one Sunday, 1 February – so early that the late stages of inebriation had scarcely given way to the first stages of hangover – a convoy came into Nesher Camp. The corporal of the guard went from tent to tent, awakening us. One by one we staggered out. Day had not yet broken. “What is the time?” said Webster or he may have said, “what is it this time?” McClenahan obviously thought the latter. “The Stern Gang and the Arab Liberation Army have joined forces and have taken over the camp,” he said. Not, I thought, the best of quips at 4.30 a.m.

Ten lorries and two jeeps had entered the camp. Each vehicle had its identification marks covered over. One lorry was empty. The other nine were obviously fully laden; their cargoes lashed down under heavy tarpaulins. A captain and two subalterns walked over to us. They were from 193 Bulk Petrol Transport Company, which distributed fuel to army units throughout Palestine. It was based at Jalama, lying about four miles south of Nesher Camp at the junction of the Nazareth and Jenin roads. The company’s tankers and lorries were constantly drawing fuel from our installations so we had come to know its officers quite well.

The captain produced a requisition order from C.RASC, Haifa, requiring us to refuel all the vehicles, and to supply in addition 100 jerricans of petrol. Since we had no way of summoning the Arab labourers at that time in the morning, Webster told McClenahan to call out the Basuto pioneers and get things moving with their help. We invited the three officers to join us for breakfast. Jad Mohammed rose to the occasion splendidly, taking orders for drinks before even so much as putting a kettle on the stove. It was, it may be said, not considered at all out of place to have the bar open by sunrise.

“This is all very mysterious,” said Webster, as we settled down. “Top secret, old boy,” said the captain; “we’re loaded with arms, surplus war material you know.” Webster was impressed. “Where on earth are you taking them,” he asked? “That is absolutely top secret,” said the captain; “we’re taking them down to Rafah.” This was an Arab town on the Egyptian border, some 20 miles south of Gaza. As we downed our eggs, bacon, and beer, I made what I felt was a fatuous comment about how nice it must be to have a Sunday outing in the country. To my surprise, one of the subalterns suggested that I make the trip with him. “Keep me company,” he said, “and give you a chance to see a bit more of Palestine.” I looked at Webster. “I don’t want to know anything about it,” he said, which I took to be his approval. Sunday was not, after all, a working day.

The whole operation went like clockwork. We reached Rafah in the early afternoon. An Egyptian Army convoy was already drawn up there. Twenty or thirty men were resting in the shade of its vehicles. They were immediately put to work. The tarpaulins were removed from the RASC trucks, and the crates of arms and ammunition were rapidly transferred to the Egyptian ones. At the same time Jamala vehicles were refueled from the jerricans we had carried. The whole operation took no more than half an hour and the paperwork took only a few minutes more. The return journey was quite uneventful, and I was back in Nesher Camp by about 9 p.m. Having missed dinner, Jad Mohammed brought sandwiches to my tent. As I ate, I glanced at an unread copy of the Palestine Post I had lying there. The headline read, “CADOGAN REPLIES TO U.N. COMMISSION. NO MILITIA BEFORE MANDATE ENDS.” Sir Alexander Cadogan, British delegate to the United Nations, had been answering questions before the Partition Implementation Commission, and had declared that London would not allow members of the Commission to enter Palestine until two weeks before the termination of the Mandate. “What is His Majesty’s Government’s position on the question of recruitment of an armed militia?” Cadogan was asked. “His Majesty’s Government,” he replied, “cannot allow the formation of such forces prior to the termination of the Mandate,”

he replied. I inferred from the exchange that the government in London would not afford legal recognition to Haganah such as to enable them to manufacture or otherwise procure arms. Arms to Arabs was apparently one thing, arms to Jews another.

Dear Editor....

It was approaching midnight. I collected my mail from the platoon office. It was for the most part routine memoranda originating from that office but one item was from C.RASC and aroused my curiosity – and alarm. It was to the effect that I should hold myself in readiness to attend a Unit Officer's Fire Fighting Course at Ataka, in the Egyptian Canal Zone. This was something I might have welcomed had it not been for Valentina. Indeed, the notice made me realize just how fond of her I had become, and, I hoped, she of me. I did not want to leave Haifa.

That night I made no entry in the diary. I felt that it would be decidedly unwise to record my unauthorized trip to Rafah, which clearly involved a serious breach of security on the part of all involved. But there was more to it than that. I had witnessed the transfer of a considerable quantity of (supposedly) surplus British arms and ammunition to the Egyptian military, I had seen a unit of the Transjordan Frontier Force moved from Palestine to Transjordan, and I knew that British army petrol was being appropriated, without hindrance, by Arab irregulars in Palestine. I sat down, by then in the early hours of the morning of 2 February, and wrote a polemical letter to the Palestine Post. "Like begets like!" I proclaimed, arguing that reactionary forces in Britain and America naturally gravitate to those in Palestine, and that the policies of the two great powers were exacerbating differences between Arabs and Jews. I commended Mapam, the new United Workers' Party, for "its revolutionary consciousness, and insistence upon the unity of the proletariat, be they Arab or Jewish," and I identified the National Liberation League as "the sole Arab force sincerely working for peace and progress." As I finished the letter I was confident that I would not actually post it!

I re-read the letter before breakfast. I realized that its tone was gratingly shrill, the reasoning unnecessarily convoluted, and my personal leanings by no means well expressed. Otherwise I thought it excellent (and over half a century later I retain a vestigial regard for it). I decided that I would post it. There was, of course, one problem, that of anonymity! I used a Welsh pseudonym, Ap Gwalch, literally, "son of a hawk." I hit upon it not because of its meaning – I was after all dovish rather than hawkish – but because anglicized as "Gwalchs" it was an imperfect sound-alike for Wilks. In all truth it was very silly since anyone blessed with a knowledge of Welsh might easily have established my identity. As it turned out no one did, or at least no one communicated the matter to Field Security.

I posted the letter before breakfast and looked for the day's Palestine Post. It had not arrived nor did it for several hours. It consisted of a single page "Special Edition," and the headline declared, "'PALESTINE POST PRESS AND OFFICES DESTROYED.'" At 10.45 p.m. on 1 February a British army truck stolen some days earlier was being parked at the premises of the Palestine Post in Jerusalem. The vehicle was packed with explosives, and blew up a few minutes later. No organization immediately claimed responsibility for the attack though rumours soon began to circulate, one that it was an Arab reprisal for IZL bombings in Jerusalem, and another that IZL (or the Stern Gang) was expressing disapproval of the political stance of the newspaper. Years later an Israeli report came to my attention that identified the attack as having been carried out by a Palestinian, Abou Khalil Genno, assisted by two British deserters, one a police captain and the other an army corporal. Be that as it may, in the circumstances I did not expect to hear of my letter to the Palestine Post again. Much to my surprise it was in the issue for 10 February.. So much for Ap Gwalch and his first and only appearance in print!

376 Petrol Platoon

On 3 February I confronted the unwelcome fact that, at a date yet to be made known, I had to attend a fire-fighting course in Egypt. I approached Webster with the suggestion that he inform C.RASC that I could not possibly be spared from my platoon duties. "Of course we

can spare you," he said, heartily. "That's very good to know, sir," I replied, unsure whether or not I should feel mortified by his remark. My next gambit was to approach McClenahan. In the course of January he (by now, "Paddy") had become a good friend. That evening I plied him liberally with whisky. "On me tonight," I insisted. When I judged that he was suitably mellow but not drunk, I told him that I thought he had been working too hard and that he seemed to me quite exhausted. He readily agreed. I said that a spot of leave or something like that might do him the world of good. He was enthusiastic. "Egypt," I said; "a spell there, relaxing in the Canal Zone, might be just the thing." My strategy was faulty. "Egypt, not on your life," said McClenahan; "haven't you been reading about the attacks on the trains in Palestine?" I had, and recognized defeat. "About time you bought a round," I remarked, rather testily.

In fact both McClenahan and I truly did consider ourselves overworked. Between us we ran the installations that were still needed to maintain the level of vehicle fuels required by the army. A number of other junior subalterns were posted to the platoon but it soon became obvious that we were being used by C.RASC as a convenient low-level transit camp. Some of the transients were awaiting repatriation, some knew they were being transferred to Middle East or other commands, and some had no idea whatsoever of their next posting. They were mostly part of the surplus of specialist officers that was building up as the army contracted the range of its operations. McClenahan and I were disappointed that none of the newcomers was assigned to take over parts of our load.

As for Webster, he retained his minimalist approach to running the platoon; that is, he did as little as possible in order to minimize the number of things he might do wrong. In maintaining this approach to his job he was greatly aided by the fact that he had two subordinates who were (so we prided ourselves) efficient. Be that as it may, McClenahan and I were very young officers and in many respects, bewildered ones. We found ourselves (if I may mix metaphors) whistling in the dark on the fringes of the morass of Oil Politics! It had becoming clear to us (as this memoir has chronicled) that the British Government had decided that its supply of oil depended on maintaining good relations with the Arab League states, the corollary of this being that British forces in Palestine were used to hinder the development of Jewish military capability. I myself was, I think, rather more perturbed by these considerations than the more pragmatically inclined McClenahan, but we were both greatly angered by what we regarded as the stupidity of C.RASC ("crass C.RASC" as we had it) in declining to act on our confident belief there were taps on the platoon's pipeline in Balad esh-Sheikh; angered by that but incensed by the loss of petrol being attributed to our incompetence.

On the morning of 5 February an order was delivered to me in camp by a dispatch rider from C.RASC. At 6 a.m. on 7 February I was to report to an officer of the Royal Engineers at Haifa railway station. I would serve as Officer in Command of Train and he would brief me. I was horrified, having no idea whatsoever of just what would be required of me. I saw Valentina that evening. I gave her the bad news, saying how sorry I was to be leaving Haifa even for a short time. I put the best gloss on things as I could. I explained that despite Webster's protests to C.RASC about not being able to spare me, he was told that after careful consideration it had been decided that I was ideally suited for further training in the new advanced techniques for dealing with petrol fires. I also made sure that Valentina appreciated that of all the officers travelling on the train, I was the one chosen to ensure its safety. "I will warn IZL not to attack it," said Valentina; "I know they would not want to suffer heavy casualties."

David dropped in while I was talking to Valentina. I had not seen him since his return to Haifa. He had been very busy, he said. I made a point of telling him about the convoy carrying arms to Rafah. He said that it was news to him, but that he was not surprised. Such actions were to be expected as more and more British army camps were closing down. I took the opportunity to ask him about the report of talks between Haganah and IZL. In his opinion, he said, no agreement between the two could work. Many of the senior Haganah commanders were bitterly opposed to its right-wing politics. No action would be taken against IZL or the Stern Gang until the mandate ended, but then both organizations would

rapidly be suppressed. From the way David talked I had little doubt that he had cast in his lot with the new party, Mapam. What, I asked him, was the attitude of Mapam to the Palestine Communist Party, since the two seemed ideologically so close. The Communist Party, David said, was very small, having only two or three thousand members. It supported the ideal of a bi-national Arab and Jewish state, but rejected the whole Zionist commitment to creating a Jewish national home in Palestine. It was simply too doctrinaire to make common cause with Mapam. But, David added, the breakaway communists of the League for National Liberation were gaining much ground among the Arab workers and might be able to make common cause with Mapam in the future.

Troop Train to Egypt

Early in the morning of 7 February one of the platoon's drivers took me to the Haifa railway station to board a train to Suez. A captain of the Royal Engineers took me aside for briefing. He explained that being Officer in Command of Train was a jolly serious business. All the chaps were on their way out of Palestine. They hadn't been killed there yet, so we had to make jolly well sure they got to the Canal Zone safely, didn't we? I was quite impressed. It was certainly a step up from being in charge of the Nesher Transshipment Sidings. The good captain then referred to recent intelligence reports. The Stern Gang, he told me, was expected to target the jolly old railways again any time now. I think we all called it the Stern Gang at that time, but it called itself the Stern Group. Whether "Gang" or "Group," however, seemed to make no difference to its ability to blow up trains. I experienced a considerable dampening of my enthusiasm for assuming my first military command! The captain went on to give me a set of instructions "to read and digest." There was much in them about procedures to be followed should the line be mined and the train derailed. There was also much about padlocking personal arms, for it had apparently become something of a sport for Arab youths to jump on and off the slow-moving trains, snatching up a rifle or two within seconds.

The captain hovered over me as I read the instructions. I finished. "It's all jolly simple, you see," he said. "Do you have any questions?" For a few disconcerting seconds my mind was totally blank. Then inspiration came. "Do we have any padlocks?" I asked. "Jolly good point," my briefer said; "we have lots of padlocks." "And chains?" I asked. "And chains," he replied. He had me sign for a quite indeterminate number of heaped padlocks and chains, and admonished me to make sure that the men did not lose the keys.

During this lengthy briefing I saw the passengers-to-be arriving at the station from their various units, and watched them being drawn up in groups by a number of sergeants, corporals and lance-corporals who obviously knew what they were doing. They thus had a useful advantage over me. I also realized that I was the only officer on the train. I asked the captain how many men would be travelling. He consulted a sheet of paper and said that the best figure he had was about 150 men, most of them on postings to Middle East command. Enough was obviously enough for my mentor. "Jolly good show," he said; "it's all yours now". He walked away, and then turned back. "Jolly good luck," he proclaimed; "we haven't had a train blown up for some weeks now." I felt I was meant to be jolly well consoled by this piece of information, but I remember thinking that "some weeks" might well have given the Stern Gang a jolly good amount of time to prepare their next attack.

Boarding went well. The NCOs knew just what to do. They paraded their men, and I addressed them about the hazards of the journey. They were issued with the padlocks and chains. "Be sure you don't lose the keys," I said. "And jolly good luck," I added, "we haven't had a train blown up for some weeks now." The men filed into the first four carriages. There was, however, a fifth. A motley assembly of civilians piled rather than filed into it. I neither knew whom they were nor whether they were meant to be on the train at all, but I had more pressing questions to deal with. First, in which carriage does an Officer in Command of Train install himself? This I was able to solve. Since it had been impressed on me throughout cadet training that an officer must always lead his men, I opted for the first carriage – reassuring myself that the massive engine that was to pull us would surely absorb the main impact of any mine on the track! The second question was equally easily resolved.

How could I exercise effective control over some 150 soldiers distributed between four carriages having no connecting corridors? Delegation was the answer. There were three sergeants on board, and I assigned them responsibility for carriages 2, 3 and 4. In carriage 1 I had the men stack their rifles within easy reach of their seats, secure them with the padlocks, and hand the keys over to me. The train steamed out of Haifa station as we were completing this procedure.

Between Haifa and Binyamina the railway ran near the coast, the shimmering waters of the Mediterranean on the one side and the bleak foothills of Carmel on the other. There were villages of brown stone houses that were obviously Arab, and others of white concrete structures that were obviously Jewish. Under the United Nations plan both were to become part of the Jewish State, and one realized the formidable problem of satisfactorily partitioning one British mandated territory into two independent and sovereign states. The railway swung inland to skirt Tulkarm, a town to be part of Arab Palestine, and for the next hour or so followed much the course of the proposed boundary along the western edge of the Plain of Sharon before steaming into Lydda. There a traveller could make connections for Tel Aviv to the west and for Jerusalem to the east. I decided to take advantage of the halt to check on the other three carriages that were my responsibility.

I had assumed that the sergeants in charge of them would have had rifles stacked in much the same way as I had. I was wrong. On entering carriage 2 not a single rifle was visible. Proudly, the sergeant in charge took me to the toilet. There they were, secured by a maze of padlocks and chains to rusting pipes that, in their better days, might have been described as "the plumbing." I could not imagine the scene had the train been attacked and the weapons required, for only one man at a time could have intruded himself into the narrow confines of that temporary armory, there to match his key against thirty or forty locks. But certainly theft seemed effectively ruled out. "Jolly good," I said, and decided to leave well enough alone. "I've told the men to be careful not to piss on the weapons," said the sergeant. "Good thinking," I murmured. Whistles blew, and I was rather relieved that I had no opportunity to see what ingenuity had been applied to security in the other two carriages.

From Lydda the line veered gently towards the coast once again, then to following a course never a few miles from the Mediterranean coast on the right but on the fringes of the Negev and Sinai deserts to the left. Passing through Jewish Rehovot and Yibna, and through Arab Isdud, Majdal, Gaza and Khan Yusuf, we crossed into Egypt at Rafah. I had little thought, a week earlier, that I would visit it again so soon. By this stage of the journey I felt that the possibility of any attack on the train by Jewish extremists might be totally discounted, but I recognized that the pilfering of rifles (or for that matter watches, boots, or whatever) by Arab petty thieves had still to be guarded against. I found myself with the leisure to jot down a few observations. The diary reads,

Throughout South Palestine the army camps were all deserted. They were being taken to bits brick by brick by the Arabs, who carried off the debris on their donkeys to who knows where. The Sinai Desert, miles after miles of sand, but with many oases, with caravans in some of them. The Bedouin put up their black tents under the palm trees. They saunter around with their long swords very conspicuously displayed. Their women are veiled and wear, again, black. They have beautiful ornaments hanging down the centre of the face. All quite romantic in the best Lawrence tradition, but how peripheral these people seem to the struggle that is going on in the north.

Sometime, somewhere in this long journey night fell. The puffing and chugging of the train were, unlikely, as it may seem, outdone by the snoring and snorting and belching and farting of the occupants of the carriage. We slept. We were roused only a few hours later by much clanging and bumping and whistling and shouting. By pooling their decidedly inadequate resources of Arabic the men of whom I was in temporary command found out that we were at El-Qantara East, and that we were changing engines. "Jolly good show," I said, acknowledging their initiative while preserving my dignity. I decided to do no more than glance into the other carriages carrying troops, assuming that if anything was wrong the

sergeants would contact me. They did not. We steamed out of El-Qantara East, slowed but did not stop at Isma'iliya, and pulled into Suez around midnight.

Detraining proceeded remarkably well. Army transport was drawn up outside the station and a number of NCOs descended on the 150 or so men whose safety has been entrusted to me. In no time at all the train of which I had been Officer in Command was emptied of all its passengers and their belongings. I watched in some amazement as, by dint of much shouting and yelling, they were drawn up in ranks on the platforms and virtually terrorized into (rapidly even if mistakenly) identifying their rifles and removing the padlocks. Roll calls were made and those who had failed to join the train were recorded as absent without leave. In groups of about twenty, the men were marched off to the waiting lorries. I received a salute from each party. I thought them rather half-hearted but it was, after all, the early hours of the morning.

To Fort Agrud and Back

The lorries vanished into the darkness. Two of the sergeants from the train remained, and I found that they were also attending the fire-fighting course. A jeep with RASC markings arrived at the station. The driver informed us that our destination was Fort Agrud, and that was the first time I had ever heard the name. There was one small problem. A large pile of padlocks and chains remained on the platform. "Are we supposed to take them with us?" I asked the driver. He laughed heartily, clearly assuming that I was joking. "They are always gone by morning, sir." I decided not to pursue this obscure remark. We drove off.

We took the Cairo road. The sand had drifted across it and it was virtually impossible to distinguish highway from desert. Fort Agrud, our driver said, was 12 miles west of Suez. We arrived there in about half an hour, and were met by the Duty Sergeant. He detailed a corporal to take the two newly arrived sergeants to their quarters, and apologized to me for my accommodation not yet being ready. "Would you mind dossing down just for a night in a temporary place?" he asked. I was shown to a rather large tent. A sizeable rent in the canvas admitted enough moonlight for me to see a camp bed and chest of drawers. "Good night, sir," said the Duty Sergeant. It was still very hot, and I had no inclination to unpack. I stripped and lay down. I heard a growl. It came, quite definitely, from within the tent. As my eyes grew more accustomed to the light, I realized that there was a rather large dog tethered to the centre pole. "There's a good boy," I said, with scant regard for the matters of gender. I fell into a deep sleep.

I woke at first light, several hours later. There was indeed a dog in the tent. It was obviously a German Shepherd and obviously a male. I stroked him, and we established communication of sorts; that is, he made it clear that he was hungry. So was I! Soon after a Lance Corporal arrived. He announced that he was to be my batman for the duration of the course. He saw the dog, which by this time was positively doting on me. "Blimey," he exclaimed; "stone the crows" (or some such expletive). It turned out that the dog had been attacking everyone who approached him and had seriously bitten several such offenders. He had accordingly been tethered in the tent pending being shot in the morning. Now, however, as the corporal put it, "that dog's taken a shine to you, sir." He had indeed, and more to the point no longer appeared interested in biting anyone. I secured a reprieve for him.

There was little that could be said for the camp at Fort Agrud. It was extremely hot and devoid of all but the most basic amenities. Training sessions seldom occupied more than a few hours in the morning. We were all assembled to help stoke up some large fires. It often proved surprisingly difficult and an observer might well have thought we were being trained as arsonists rather than firefighters. We were, however, subsequently shown how to put out the fires we had lit (with, let it be admitted, considerable glee). More laboriously, we were made to clamber up rickety ladders to rather precarious platforms from which, hooked (safely, we hoped) on to steel cables, we descended rapidly to earth. Such pursuits were supplemented by a few talks delivered by "technical staff." They referred to coefficients of this, that and the other. For the most part I did not understand what they were talking about and nor, I suspected, did they. After the first session I realized that I was the only officer attending the course. I indulged myself in a little paranoia (if one can do that). C.RASC

Haifa, I decided, had not been pleased to learn from Webster that two of his subalterns, McClenahan and myself, believed that 376 Petrol Platoon's petrol supply was being tapped in Balad esh-Sheikh. So perhaps C.RASC was simply getting me out of their way for a while? I shall never know, but will always be suspicious. .

There was no officers' mess in Fort Agrud and protocol did not allow me to use that of the sergeants. The batman assigned to me brought meals and drinks to the tent out of which I, and my canine companion, never did get moved. Most afternoons were free. All afternoons were stiflingly hot. I found it too uncomfortable to siesta. My first afternoon, that of the 8th, I procured a length of rope and walked my new canine companion into the barren sandstone foothills of Gebel Ataka, above the camp to the south. The flatlands below were featureless, marked only by a scatter of small army (or ex-army) camps, but in the far distance the glistening tanks of the oil refineries in Suez were just visible. The sheer desolation of the landscape defied my attempts to convey on paper its oddly overwhelming quality. An Egyptian railway line had once run from Suez to Cairo, passing Fort Agrud. I saw no sign of it, and assumed that it had been closed with the creation of the Canal Zone. A scatter of buildings around Fort Agrud housed for the most part civilian workers for the army and their families. They were mainly immigrants from Sudan and in contrast to Egyptians I thought them (so the diary has it) "quiet and respectful." I was able to let the dog off his makeshift leash, and he had a marvelous time sliding on the scree. It was the first of several such expeditions.

The next afternoon, that of 9 February, I decided to visit Suez. My brief encounter in December with the parts of the town posted "Internationally Out of Bounds" had convinced me that so they should be! I commented on the pervasive smell of human excreta and of the unrelenting attention of the hundreds of flies. I also became aware once again of the high level of hostility towards British servicemen. There was an Indian shopkeeper in a bazaar in the old town who much enjoyed talking. One conversation I thought highly germane to the matter, and I recollected it as accurately as I could on my return to camp:

He thought that anti-British feeling in general was not very violent, because of the granting of Indian independence, the coming grant of dominion status to Ceylon, the plans for Malaya, and the promised withdrawal from Palestine. But he thought that British involvement in Europe brought on it much antagonism by association, due to the intense hatred of Asian peoples towards the French and Dutch. Their use of modern techniques of warfare in Indo-China, Viet-Nam, Indonesia and so forth, against poorly armed local movements, was in his opinion horrifying. He thought that this was leading to a strong growth of pro-Soviet feeling in many parts of Asia and of Middle East.

I thought back to conversations with David (of Hashomer Hatza'ir) and remembered his intense anger at Britain's continuing refusal to accept the right of all Jewish refugees to enter Palestine.

There was one especial pleasure in going into Suez. Copies of the Egyptian newspapers in English and French (as well, of course, Arabic) were available. I caught up with events in Palestine, to which much space was devoted. I learned that the Council of the Arab League had opened its sessions in Cairo the day before I arrived in Fort Agrud. The mufti, Amin el-Husseini, represented Palestine. It seemed that the general feeling of the members was that no major operations within Palestine should be undertaken until the British evacuation was complete. It seemed, however, that Egypt was wary of the ambitions of King Abdullah of Transjordan towards Palestine, and was therefore seeking to make common cause with the Mufti. Egypt, I gathered, wanted the Mufti's support for its plan to annex the Negev, which according the Partition Plan was to become part of the Jewish State. In return for that support, Egypt would view with favour the Mufti's ambition to head an independent Palestinian State with Jerusalem as its capital.

I revisited the Suez suburb, Port Tewfik, and again sang its praises. "The streets," I wrote, "are beautifully laid out, there are large, cool houses surrounded by trees, and innumerable and expensive private clubs where wealthy Arabs take their women to drink." There were

also a few public bars that served alcoholic drinks at barely affordable prices. In one of these places a person, introducing himself as a banker, told me a story. He was probably already a little the worse for drink, but I thought what he said was sufficiently interesting to be recorded:

King Farouk is a feudal monarch and an astute business man, so it would seem. Some time ago he imported into Egypt huge quantities of Palestinian oranges, flooded the markets, and brought the local orange merchants to the verge of ruin. He then stepped in to "save" the situation, nationalizing all the orange groves by paying minimal compensation to the stricken merchants. Then – guess? – a ban on the import of Palestinian oranges was imposed, and for good measure the price of the Egyptian orange was raised.

I supposed that some factual basis existed for this story. I had no doubt about the veracity of another conversation I had in the same bar. The diary reads,

I had a chance to talk to an officer on leave from Cyprus, who was in charge of a number of the Jewish refugee camps there. He says that conditions are quite horrifying. He has families of as many as five adults and seven children living in 180 lbs tents, and 120 people are allocated to one marquee. There is virtually no fuel for either cooking or heating purposes, and food is cut right back to the barest minimum. But, he says, within the bounds of the camps the Jews are free to organize their own lives, and on special occasions are allowed out of camp. As he points out, at least the Jews in these camps know that this time they will get out, that sooner or later they will arrive in Palestine. He thinks morale is good among those he calls the "inmates."

The acquisition (temporarily) of a dog at Fort Agrud was one stroke of luck. There was a second. Only a day or two after my arrival the batman assigned to me mentioned, almost apologetically, that there were some old books in the Chief Clerk's offices but that they were probably of no interest. I supposed that he was right but nonetheless went to take a look. The Chief Clerk pointed out a box in a small shed that had seen better times, and said that I should see if there was anything interesting. There was. Near the top of the box was a most unlikely book to find in Fort Agrud and one moreover that I had never read. It was Hewlett Johnson's *The Socialist Sixth of the World*, published in 1939. Johnson was a dedicated man of the left who had been made Dean of Canterbury Cathedral in 1931. My diary for 11 February indicates what, in the circumstances of 1948, particularly engaged my interest:

According to the Dean, the Jews of the USSR were granted land in Biro Bijan, in the east, an area about twice the size of Palestine. In 1928 seven thousand Jewish workers settled on collective farms there. In 1934 it was granted the status of an Autonomous Province. Previously Biro Bijan was uninhabited: an area of mosquito infested marsh, desert, and rock. I am reminded of the Nesher Cement Works – of the man who told me, "I marked out this factory from a raft ferried over the marshes." There are obvious similarities with Palestine – but Palestine just did not happen to be uninhabited

My general impression of the fire-fighting course is reflected in the paucity of diary entries. There was very little that seemed worth recording, and I think that those who gave the course were as bored by it as those who took it. Any enthusiasm we had for it burnt out. I was much pleased when the Chief Clerk informed me that orders had come through that I should not travel by the troop train but by regular passenger service. This, I understood from him, was a privilege to which I was entitled as an officer. The good news was that I would not have to serve as Officer in Command of Train again. The bad news was that there was no regular train for two or three days. My dismay was only a little assuaged by the fact that I gained a few more days with a dog whose future seemed to be unfortunately limited. On the brighter side, I did have a little more time to rummage further in the Chief Clerk's box.

I looked through the other books and pamphlets. Again I thought one or two matters worth noting. I quote the diary entry:

From one I see that Palestine was classified as an 'A' Mandate – that is, one that shall not be utilized as a base for military forces, see article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations. In 1947, there were 150,000 police and soldiers in this country of just under 2 million people! But of course oil interests have to be protected, and the military presence maintained in the Eastern Mediterranean. Iran is the second most important supplier of oil to the Commonwealth, while the new pipeline that was built from the Mosul oil fields in Iraq to Haifa was expected to add another two million tons of oil to the existing Commonwealth supplies. Haifa is furthermore an excellent fuelling base for the Mediterranean fleet. One can see why the British have so great an interest in Palestine – and why the Secretary of the Communist Party of Palestine, Mikunis, in evidence before UNSCOP [United Nations Special Committee on Palestine] in July 1947, maintained: "Only the abolition of the imperialist mandate, the complete evacuation of the British Army and the opportunity of free economic development, the setting up of democratic governing institutions, hand in hand with social reforms and the consolidation of the national and civil democratic rights of the two peoples – Arab and Jewish – will secure the complete independence of Palestine."

On the morning of 20 February the Chief Clerk informed me that a booking had been made in my name on that night's Haifa train. Whatever lethargy had overtaken me in the torpid atmosphere of Fort Agrud vanished. I began to make a mental checklist of all the things that could go wrong that night. Perhaps no vehicle would be available to get me to Suez so late in the evening, or perhaps no driver would be available for an available vehicle. No doubt about it, I would have a driver take me to Suez in the late afternoon. So it was that before it was dark I bade farewell to my erstwhile batman, who had truly done much to make my sojourn in Fort Agrud tolerable, and to the dog who had no reason to suspect that I might be about to become his erstwhile friend. Sadly, there was no way I could take him to Palestine with me.

A driver dropped me off in Suez in the early evening. I found a cinema that was in walking distance of the railway station. An American film was showing. It was a violent gangster movie that had acquired both French and Arabic sub-titles somewhere along the line. The Egyptian audience showed their appreciation of modern western culture by clapping enthusiastically every time anyone was shot, knifed, strangled, or otherwise dispatched to the hereafter. That I had to leave before the end of the film in order to catch the train was by far the best thing that I could say about it.

The journey to Haifa was blissfully uneventful. The Chief Clerk had told me that the Stern Gang only attacked troop trains. I slept virtually the whole way in great comfort, rousing only at a few dimly lit stations at which we made brief stops. For once the Army had done me proud by providing a first class ticket. I reached Nesher Camp midmorning on 21 February, to find it agog with news.

376 Petrol Platoon

Three days before my return from Egypt three staff officers from H.Q. North Palestine District had arrived at 376 Petrol Platoon. Major Williams – he who had insisted that McClenahan and I were incorrectly dipping the tanks – was one of the three. With him were Majors De-Yong and Atherton, both commanding other RASC petrol units but otherwise unknown to us. They spent several hours studying the operating procedures of Nesher II Installation, but had shown little interest in those of the Nesher Transshipment Sidings for which I was responsible. They gave Webster no idea of the purpose of their visit, and he was most surprised when the three proceeded to Nesher after leaving the camp. He gathered that there had been "a spot of bother" there, but knew no details.

Webster was more than a little worried. He wondered whether "our friendly relations" (as he liked to put it) with Nesher people had come to the attention of headquarters. "What do

they say in Nesher?" I asked. Webster had thought it inadvisable to go there, thinking that perhaps someone in the village was passing information to the police or army intelligence. I said that I'd go and talk to Praff providing he would deal with any fires in the camp while I was away! This jogged Webster's memory. "How was Egypt?" he finally inquired. I took this as a rhetorical question, and went to Nesher.

I explained the situation to Praff, and asked him whether the three staff officers had approached Schnitlander, whom I still did not trust, at the Cement Works. I was told that they had not. Indeed, Praff denied all knowledge of their visit to Nesher, and assured me that there was nothing to worry about. Haganah security, he insisted, was perfect. I felt that he was prevaricating. It was not until some forty years later that I found out that he was. There really had been an incident. In 1989 I talked with David Schvit of Nesher. "I can't forget," he said,

the time of my encounter with the Staff Officers. I can still see it. There was a driver and one soldier in the car, and the three Staff Officers. This was in February or March 1948. I was in Nesher still, on my marriage leave.... One of my [Haganah] soldiers was on the roof of the Nesher Post Office. He had a Sten gun.... There were some girls on the road, and he decided to show off. He came down to the road. Just then a car with five or six British soldiers came along the road. Three were staff officers, with red bands on their hats. They saw him. They seized him. Someone told me what had happened. We had only three Sten guns left in Nesher. I went to the road, and saw the kid in the car. I yelled, "Stop!" I had a Sten gun and a hand grenade. I whistled. "Stop!" One of the officers came out. He was so tall. He said, "Boy, what are you doing?" I said, "I am Haganah. I want the gun back." Then he acted like a father. I was afraid. Oh, I was afraid. We were making the Sten guns in the Cement Works. A Sten was like a holy thing. We had very few. Each piece was precious. The officer said, "My boy, you can have a receipt for the Sten gun. Bring the receipt to Haifa and then you can get the gun back." I heard the soldier in the car cock his 303 rifle. I cocked my Sten. Now the officer was afraid. "Put it down," he said. At the same moment a British armoured car arrived, a Bren gun carrier from Haifa. I had my back to the road. It stopped. Someone shouted out: "Sir. Is there anything I can do?" I took out the grenade. I put my finger in the pin. I said to the officer, "If you say anything, we shall both die." He said to the man in the armoured car, "It's all O.K." Do you know what I wanted to do at that moment? I wanted to kiss him. I got the gun back. I gave him back his receipt. I don't believe I did it. I was so afraid. I would love to see that officer again. All I wanted to do was kiss him.

We never did find out why the three majors went into Nesher or why Praff had been so reticent, but our speculation about the purpose of their visit to the platoon was finally ended on 28 February. On that day we received an order from C.RASC to close down Nesher Transshipment Sidings and to transfer all stocks of jerricans to Nesher II Installation. Webster, McClenahan and I talked over the matter in his tent that night. We could not see the rationale for the reorganization, but had, of course, no idea of the overall plan for the evacuation of troops from the Haifa area. The closure of the Sidings indicated that the distribution of petrol in jerricans by road transport was being curtailed, and we thought that this was perhaps because much less petrol was needed as a result of the 6th Airborne Division's withdrawal from South Palestine. As we steadily worked our way through a bottle of whisky, Webster became more rather than less agitated. He felt, he said, that the order suggested that C.RASC had learned that jerricans were finding their way from the Transshipment Sidings to the Cement Works. I pointed out that it was unlikely that three Staff Officers would visit the camp on account of a suspected loss of jerricans that were extremely unlikely to be shipped out of Palestine on the evacuation. Field Security would presumably have first carried out an investigation. And there we let the matter rest.

We turned to the matter of the reorganization of the platoon that C.RASC required. Webster said he had been holding back one piece of news. He had also been informed that another subaltern was to be posted to us. Given the surrealistic nature of the times

McClenahan and I immediately voiced our suspicions that the new man would be secretly working for Field Security. Webster responded, "There is no need to worry; I shall give him something to think about." We asked what that meant. Webster chuckled. "I am," he said triumphantly, "going to make him Fire and Messing Officer." Would I be offended by this, he inquired, since I was now the expert on fires? I said that, though naturally not a little hurt, I would swallow my pride and work with McClenahan in the Nesher II Installation. 2/Lt Driscoll arrived the next day, and seemed a little disconcerted when informed that his new role in life had to do with fire and food. In fact he turned out to be a splendid fellow but was not with us for long.

It was about midnight when Webster produced some data that he had obtained from H.Q. North Palestine District. There were figures for "officially notified casualties" for Palestine for December and the first half of January. The total deaths reported were 679, and wounded, 1533. These included, for the British security forces, 47 dead and 165 injured. Notified Arab deaths were recorded at 331 and Jewish at 90; Arab wounded at 828, Jewish 535. Webster wished us both a good night's sleep as he went to his tent.

Mahdi Bey

In the course of January it had become clear that the Arab irregulars in Balad esh-Sheikh had established the capability of closing both road and railway from Haifa. Relations between that town and Nesher were rapidly worsening and 376 Petrol Platoon, with a perimeter that extended to both, was in an incongruent position. In the first two weeks of January the number of Iraqi irregulars who had infiltrated Haifa was estimated at 400-500. To the best of my knowledge the 6th Airborne Division had no plans to stem the flow unless British camps and installations were directly threatened. Haganah, by contrast, took such action as it could. On the night of 15 January, for example, three houses in Haifa that were being used as billets for newly arrived volunteers, were demolished. We wondered how long it would be before the nest of guerillas in Balad esh-Sheikh received the same attention. In the event, the platoon's next emergency resulted not from Jewish but from Arab activity.

On 24 February the Platoon was alerted to the possibility of trouble. Late in the afternoon a telephone call from HQ North Palestine District informed us that two Jews, thought to be members of Haganah, had been killed near Kiryat Haroshet, a village about six miles from Nesher Camp on the Jenin road. Reprisals, we were told, might be expected in the vicinity of Balad esh-Sheikh. An Arab boy had already been shot near there. We were instructed to strengthen our guard immediately, and informed that armoured cars would patrol the road the next day. Nothing untoward occurred until the evening of the 25th. At about 7 p.m. I was summoned urgently from the installations. I assumed that this had something to do with the anticipated Jewish attack on Balad esh-Sheikh. I was wrong. In fact several Arabs had walked into one of our platoon offices, seized three rifles leaning against a wall, and had then disappeared. The guard at the main gate admitted that he had let three men into the camp. Assuming that they were labourers at the installations, he had not bothered to check their identity cards. He insisted, however, that they had not passed him on their way out. We immediately ordered a search of the camp but it was a waste of time. We found a weak point in the perimeter fence on the Balad esh-Sheikh side, and felt it likely that the escape had been made through it. We were never sure.

Webster was exceedingly upset. Our security had obviously been slack and he, as platoon commander, was responsible for it. Furthermore, a recent Haifa Sub-District Intelligence Summary had warned us that arms were at a premium:

The Arabs do not appear to be intentionally killing members of the security forces but are snatching weapons at every opportunity.... It is obvious that the Arabs are determined to obtain arms by any means. The number of pistols owned by Arabs is large but the number of rifles is relatively small and it appears that the Arabs are going all out to increase that number even at the risk of being killed in the process.

I suppose we had drawn the attention of the platoon to this, but no one had taken the warning very seriously. Be that as it may, it was too late to do anything about the stolen arms that night, once we had made sure that the raiders were not still in the camp. I said that I would go to Balad esh-Sheikh early the next morning. Not having been to see the mukhtar since returning from Egypt, I would pay a courtesy call on him and his elders, and use the opportunity to see if I could learn anything about the raid.

Early in the morning of 26 February I greeted the mukhtar. The ever-reliable assistant timekeeper, Mohammed, interpreted for me as usual. Coffee was served, strong and sweet. I was asked how I had found Egypt. "Wonderful, very peaceful and very prosperous," I replied. "Allah be praised," the mukhtar murmured. After further such civilized interchanges, I delicately mentioned the matter of the theft. "Allah, Allah," said the mukhtar, "trouble, trouble." Naturally he himself knew nothing about it. We would have to see Mahdi Bey. It was a name that meant nothing to me at the time.

A young boy led us to a house in the higher part of the town, and we were ushered into the presence of Mahdi Bey. He wore British Army mess dress complete with a Sam Browne belt. His age? I would have guessed that he was in his early sixties, but "seasoned" was the word that came to mind. He introduced himself as a colonel in the Arab Liberation Army. Quite unsure of what protocol demanded, and quite unnecessarily since I was in uniform, I introduced myself as a second lieutenant in the British Army. My last experience with a colonel had been on the journey from Suez to Jerusalem. My second colonel seemed to me much less terrifying. "To what do I owe the honour of your visit?" he asked, or something to that effect. I told him about the theft in Nesher Camp. He left the room for a few minutes. On his return tea was served. He made no reference to the missing rifles, but started to chat about this, that, and the other. He said that he was an Iraqi, and that he had fought against the Turks during the First World War. He pointed to the campaign ribbons he was wearing, assuming that I would immediately recognize them. It seemed only polite to pretend that I did, and make visible signs of being impressed. He obviously enjoyed having an audience. I made notes on the conversation that evening, though I confused the Arab Liberation Army, whose field commander was Fawzi el-Kawukji, with the rival irregular groups controlled by the Husseinis and commonly known by that name:

I met an officer commanding a unit of the Hussein Arab Army. His group is on a guerilla footing in the area at present, but is being reformed on the model of command used in the British Army, in readiness for take-over after the British troops leave. He spoke good English, German and Hebrew, as well as his native Arabic. He had served at one time as an officer in the British Army. He was strongly anti-Russian and anti-Communist, and regarded the Russians as pro-Jewish. He believed that all of the Jewish workers' organizations were communistic, including the Histadruth itself (which does take some believing). He exerts complete power in Balad esh-Sheikh....

Mahdi Bey talked for well over half an hour. I wish I had recorded more of what he said, for he spoke of having served under "Colonel Lorenj" and it was only some weeks later that it dawned on me that the reference must have been to T. E. Lawrence ("of Arabia"). He did ask me what I thought of the Partition Plan. "Only time will tell," I said. He liked that. "In Islam," he replied, "we say that only Allah knows." He was very proud of his former association with the British Army, and said that he was using it as a model for his reform of the guerillas into a regular fighting force.

Mahdi Bey was called away for a few minutes. An interesting man, I thought, but not one likely to be helpful in the matter of the theft. He returned, and I rose to take my leave. "I have enjoyed talking to you," he said. "You will find your rifles in the back of the Jeep." I do not know how he read the look of utter astonishment on my face, but he became very apologetic. The men who had stolen them, he said, had not been acting under orders. It was quite intolerable that they should have broken into a British Army camp when everyone knew that the British and the Arabs were friends. The two ringleaders had already been shot, he added, and a third was being sent to a jail in Haifa. "Thank you, sir," I said, or something

equally inadequate. We shook hands, and I had the grace to salute him as I left. He looked much pleased by the courtesy.

I drove straight to the platoon office. "I am back," I reported to Webster. "I can see that for myself," he said testily; "what happened in Balad esh-Sheikh?" I told him about having coffee with the mukhtar. "Very strong coffee, and quite delicious," I added. "I am very happy for you," he said. "Then I had tea with another chap," I continued; "mint tea, you know. Funny sort of combination, strong coffee followed by mint tea." Webster glared. "So you didn't get any information about the theft," he said. I was much enjoying myself. "Oh, the rifles," I said, "you will find them in the back of the Jeep." He was as furious as any one could be who has just been given very good news. "Bastard," he said, and went to look in the Jeep.

That evening the drinks were on Webster. "Good show," he said, "but don't ever fool with me like that again." I was, needless to say, very pleased with myself, but the pleasure was not unalloyed. My diary entry for 26 February shows that I was rather shocked by the summary executions of two of the raiders:

I wasn't so keen on the whole business, and would rather have forgotten the rifles though it would have involved court martial of some of our poor conscripted Other Ranks. But I came away convinced of the efficiency of our local unit of the Arab Army. If this officer [Mahdi Bey] is at all typical, then indeed the Jews have reason for concern.

I was, in truth, much impressed and highly intrigued by Mahdi Bey. Mohammed, however, was quite awed, and I was not simply mocking him when I asked how he, a good communist, could feel so flattered at meeting so reactionary an Iraqi officer? I also asked Mohammad to find out more about Mahdi Bey for me. Known to have been in the great man's presence, Mohammed found that the Arab Liberation Army men in Balad esh-Sheikh would now talk to him more freely. Mahdi Bey, they told him, was responsible for keeping the road from Haifa to Jenin open. As the British withdrew, he would take over the Jewish settlements in the Jezreel valley and then seize control of Haifa itself. I could not, of course, vouch for the accuracy of this information.

There was an unexpected sequel to my encounter with Mahdi Bey. Two or three days later Mohammed gave me a photograph. He said it was one of Mahdi Bey, who had sent a man to him with instructions that the photograph should be handed to me personally.

Matters of Conscience

On 2 February Ian Mikardo had made a forceful speech in London, addressing the House of Commons. I saw a text of it three days later, and summarized parts of it that were very germane to our current circumstances:

[Mikardo] claimed that with great difficulty some Members of Parliament had unearthed a plan for Britain to re-equip and train the Iraqi army and air force. Mikardo also claimed that British officers and Other Ranks had arrived in Saudi Arabia last year and that a military mission in Egypt was supervising the delivery there of military aircraft, vehicles, and small arms. "Thus," Mikardo said, "Britain is assuring the Arab States that they will have plenty of Forces trained when they start monkeying about with the United Nations."

It was difficult for me to discount Mikardo's observations as leftwing propaganda. I had personally witnessed small arms being handed over to an Egyptian officer at Rafah the day before Mikardo's speech. I had seen Nesher Camp's unit of the Transjordan Frontier Force transferred lock, stock, and barrel to one of the Arab League states. I knew (though I cannot remember how) that the Cold Storage Depot in Nesher Camp was supplying foodstuffs to the military in Saudi Arabia. I was sure that Arab irregulars were tapping our platoon's petrol without hindrance. I had also learned that the oil companies were taking steps to anticipate Haifa's remaining Jewish in accordance with the Partition Plan. On 3 February I wrote,

Consolidated Refineries, after the massacre in December, decided to keep open to supply the British forces until the evacuation is complete, and then to transfer activities to the branch in Lebanon. The Iraq Petroleum Company, after consultations with London in January, are also moving their head office from Haifa to Tripoli and are to construct a new pipeline terminating in North Syria.

Oddly, I thought of this primarily in terms of its impact upon the Palestinian Arabs rather than Jews, for I added, "I just cannot see what will happen to the Arab proletariat hereabouts if these things occur." I did, however, on the same day, take note of a resolution of the Zionist Federation, reported in the Palestine Post and much in line with Mikardo's speech:

By impeding the defence of the Yishuv (the Jews of Palestine), allowing Arab preparations for warfare, refusing to permit the gradual transference of power and failing to cooperate with the U.N. Commission, the British Administration is responsible for avoidable bloodshed and chaos.

I found myself facing a dilemma. As a British officer I was, I supposed, expected to remain non-partisan, but I was far too political a being to be able to do that. I had come to have a considerable knowledge of the build-up of the Arab Liberation Army in Balad esh-Sheikh and of its role in the projected Arab takeover of the Haifa and district after the evacuation of British troops. Should I regard his information as in some way privileged?

It was generally known that on the end of the Mandate, now fixed for 15 May, the Arab League states would commit troops to the support of the Arab Liberation Army in Palestine. It should also have been clear to the informed observer that British policy fostered the build-up of Arab military strength while hindering that of the Jews both by blocking supplies of weapons and by curtailing the intake of refugees from Europe, many of whom were potential recruits to Haganah. It seemed that nothing short of a miracle could save the Jews after the British withdrawal. Nevertheless, despite such considerations, I retained a deep sympathy for ordinary Arabs, the Palestinian men on the street (as it were) exemplified in those whose labour kept our installations working. Their future also seemed likely to be fraught with grief.

I decided that I was not committed to secrecy about the situation in Balad esh-Sheikh. Why was this so? I think that an atavistic loyalty to Country, Army, Corps and most of all Platoon, overrode my intellectual hatred of current Government policy. After all, the Arab unit in Balad esh-Sheikh was appropriating our petrol without (so I assumed) our permission. I told Valentina what I had decided, but said that all I knew might already be known by the Jews. She seemed to think not, but said I should talk to David who, she told me for the first time, "had close connections with Haganah Intelligence." I said I would talk to him, and she telephoned him immediately.

David listened intently to what I had to say, and seemed particularly interested in my meeting with Mahdi Bey. He spoke more freely than I had known him to do before, and I assumed he knew his phone to be untapped. Haganah, he said, regarded Haifa as critical to the very existence of a Jewish state since most imports would have to be brought in through it. Even the loss of Jerusalem, he said, would not be as catastrophic in economic terms as that of Haifa. Careful plans were being made to secure Haifa and the settlements behind it. David said that he wanted to meet with me soon but ended the conversation with a curious story. Did I know, he asked, that during the last war Haganah had actually worked out a scheme for the defence of the Haifa district? It was at a time when it seemed that the Germans and Italians might sweep through Egypt into Palestine. His own settlement, Mishmar Ha'emek, was then to have become the General Headquarters for the Jewish resistance. But now, he said, the British had made clear their policy of refusing the Jews free access to Haifa port until the Mandate was ended. He wanted to talk to me again soon, he repeated, and rang off.

Haifa Enclave

I cannot pinpoint it accurately, but I think it was late in February that I first began to hear the term, “Haifa Enclave.” It may have been Webster who introduced me to it. He was summoned to HQ, North Palestine District, for a briefing on the forthcoming evacuation of troops. He assembled the platoon’s officers and sergeants that evening and, consulting his notes, gave us the gist of what he had learned. The general situation was this. First, Intelligence estimated the number of Arab guerillas already in Palestine at between 6,000 and 10,000. It was doubtful whether they would conform to the Arab League’s policy that no operations should be carried out in Palestine until the Mandate was officially terminated. Second, Webster said, the Jews were well aware of the Arab guerilla build-up, and might launch preemptive attacks immediately, confident that the British would step in before any large scale Arab counter-strikes could develop. Consequently, at the very time that the army was being rapidly reduced in strength preparatory to withdrawal, it would have to maintain a capacity to intervene in any major engagements between Arab and Jews.

A round of drinks, McClenahan asked? “No drinks until we’ve finished,” said Webster, and we realized that he had more to tell us. The present plan, he said, is to close down South Palestine District as rapidly as possible, retaining only a temporary presence in Jerusalem. Simultaneously, North Palestine District is to be progressively reduced in size to create a Haifa Enclave that will, when the last troops board ship, consist of no more than Haifa Port.

A round of drinks, McClenahan asked again? “There’s still more,” Webster replied. It was, he said, stressed that Haifa Port had to be held at all costs, and the Palestine Railway must be kept in operation for as long as possible to facilitate the movement of troops and equipment into the Enclave. The refineries must be given protection, to allow them to continue in production until the end of the Mandate. Army petrol units, 376 Petrol Platoon included, will operate as long as they can continue to obtain supplies of labour.

“So far, so good,” said Webster; “the bad news is now to come.” An officer from the 6th Airborne Division tactical command took over the briefing. In the opinion of the Division, he said, there was no way that British troops could any longer exercise an effective peacekeeping role in Palestine. Operations such as the enforcement of curfews or house-to-house searches for arms could no longer be carried out. Immediate steps should be taken to transfer all military and civil authority from Jerusalem to the Haifa Enclave, and at least two infantry brigades would be assigned to its defence until the evacuation was complete. Loss of control over the Enclave was unthinkable. It would be a military disaster, leaving the army without the means of planned withdrawal.

“That,” said Webster, “is the best I can do, and now the drinks are on me.” I think we were all taken aback by his summary of the briefing. Seldom did the “top brass” on Mount Carmel make available, on a non-classified basis, so realistic an appraisal of the current situation. I recollect that our mood that night was a solemn one.

CHAPTER 5

MARCH 1948

The Stern Group

On 1 March a headline in the Palestine Post read, “28 SOLDIERS KILLED, 33 HURT BY THREE MINES UNDER TRAIN.” The previous day a troop train from Egypt had been blown up at Rehovot, south of Tel Aviv. It was carrying 110 British soldiers, most returning from leave but a few newly posted to Palestine. The mines had been electrically detonated, apparently from a nearby orange grove. A fourth failed to explode. I was much troubled, having travelled this very same route only a week earlier. There but for the grace of God...., I thought. I had never seriously contemplated the possibility of dying in Palestine, although I realized that, fortified by the irrational confidence that only the young have in their invulnerability, I had taken too many risks in Haifa.

That morning I felt chastened. The Stern Gang (or Group) in Tel Aviv claimed responsibility for the attack. I was therefore much perturbed on seeing an army intelligence report for the week ending 10 March that seemed to indicate Haganah’s willingness to work with the terrorist organizations:

There has been considerable satisfaction in Haganah circles in Haifa as a result of the agreement which has been reached between Haganah, IZL and the Stern Gang. Local Haganah members say that now there will be little fear of terrorist attacks on the Security forces except in certain specified instances... It is reported that under the agreement the IZL and Stern will continue to operate in independent detachments but under Haganah command. This point has long been a source of trouble in the negotiations, IZL making it a minimum demand, which Haganah have constantly refused to concede.

Valentina said she knew nothing about the position of the Stern Group, but was aware that Haganah and IZL had joined forces. They will keep their own officers, she thought, but all operations would have to be cleared through the Haganah National Command. “Is it a good arrangement?” I asked. “It’s good,” she said, “because now I shan’t have to worry about your safety so much.” I saw David later in the day. He was adamant that any report of an agreement between Haganah and the Stern Group was sheer fantasy, but said that Haganah and IZL had indeed come to an understanding. It was a marriage of convenience and he did not think it was likely to last long.

I asked David more about the Stern Group. We call it Lehi, he said, from the Hebrew Lohmei Heruth Israel which means “Fighters for the Freedom of Israel.” He described it as “a totally unpredictable organization,” and expressed his surprise by its recent adoption of a strongly pro-Russian position. Lehi leaders, David said, argued that of all the great powers only the USSR was truly sincere in its support of Zionism, and they still regarded Britain as the greatest enemy of the Jews. “Do you know why they decided to attack the train?” David asked. I did not, of course. “It was a protest against Britain’s policy of refusing to allow Jewish refugees entry into Palestine.” I must have looked rather puzzled. “The British won’t let refugees in, you see, so as a reprisal Lehi decided that it would not let British soldiers in, so that is why they attacked a train bringing soldiers into Palestine and not one taking them out.” I wondered whether this was guesswork on David’s part or whether he had sources of inside information, and once again I realized how little I knew about his political activities.

Haifa

Whatever agreement IZL and the Stern Group may or may not have reached with Haganah, by the beginning of March it was quite apparent that the level of violence was

increasing sharply in Haifa. Two brief entries in my diary express my sense of the escalation of violence:

3 MARCH. It is getting almost impossible to write. Everywhere fighting has broken out, explosions are destroying property, claiming lives. There seems no hope now for any sane and rational solution. Where is the voice of those on both sides who want Arab-Jewish cooperation?

4 MARCH. As I write the hills echo with bursts of machine gun fire, and explosions, from Haifa. The wadis on Mount Carmel seem to pick up the noise and magnify it. And above all else, there is thunder, and rain comes down heavily. It is going to be war.

Those of us in Nesher Camp at this time were essentially eavesdroppers, that is, the fighting in Haifa could be heard but not seen. We felt strangely isolated. We assumed we were in the Haifa Enclave, but we had no clear idea of what that entailed or of where its borders lay. We had to depend on the daily newspapers for our knowledge of the local situation. We relied especially on the Palestine Post, which was now coming out regularly once again. Knowing that my parents would be worried as news of the fighting in Haifa appeared in the British press, I sent them a clipping from that paper for 6 March. I thought, somewhat optimistically perhaps, that it would support my assurances that the British were little more than bystanders:

HAIFA, Saturday. A bomb exploded in the hands of an Arab gangster this morning as he was carrying it towards the Carmel Carpentry shop, which he and others intended to blow up. Three Arabs were killed and two others were seriously wounded when the bomb went off prematurely. This was the second Arab attempt to demolish the shop, the first plot having been foiled by the Haganah on Thursday.

Official sources said that the bomb was a "mortar" which exploded on Yeman Steps, and had come from the direction of Talpiot Market. There was no Jewish attack on any Arab quarter today, according to Jewish sources.

The dead are Ahmad Deeb Kassim, 25, Ramadan Khamil, 40, and Mahmoud Ramadan Khamil, 12.

After it had tried several times to enter the New Business Center this afternoon, an Arab taxi was fired upon by Jewish guards, who wounded two or three of the passengers.

Arab snipers began firing into the Old Business Centre in town early this morning. A sniper was shot dead by the Jewish defenders. A Jew was slightly wounded.

From posts in Carmel Station, Arab snipers shot at an armoured car coming from Bat Galim at 3 p.m. A jeep and several taxis were also fired upon. Shots were directed at Kiryat Eliayhu from the same post at 6.40 tonight. It will be appreciated that such information was published to meet daily deadlines and that very little time could be spent on checking and evaluating the news items. The army intelligence reports were far more informative, being based on the interrogation ('debriefing') by Intelligence Corps personnel of participants in the events in question. This was often a relatively lengthy procedure, and the recipients of such information would have to wait for days or even weeks for their copies to reach them. Thus, for example, it was not until the middle of March that the report on the events noted in my diary for the 3rd and 4th finally reached the platoon:

On the morning of 4 Mar an Airborne Royal Engineers officer was killed by an Arab sniper as he went to the assistance of a Jew who had been wounded (it is believed by the same sniper) as a Jewish workers' convoy was assembling at the Armon Cinema on the borders of Hadar Hacarmel and the Arab area of Wadi Nisnas. The same night Haganah made an attack with a 40 gallon oil bomb on the house from which the firing came. The bomb exploded but without the desired effect. A second, and it is believed similar oil bomb, consisting of a 40 gallon drum with a motor tyre fastened on each end was rolled down a side road from Vine Street into the Wadi Nisnas, but failed to explode. It was destroyed by the Royal Engineers....

Following the Stern Gang attack on the Salam Building last week, some form of reprisal was expected, and on the evening of 4 Mar, a taxi carrying 400 lbs. of explosive

driven by an ex-Colonel of the Iraqi Army drove down Allenby Road from Carmel Avenue and backed up a side street opposite the entrance to Bank Street. Before the driver could get out and let the vehicle run down Bank Street into the New Business centre, Haganah members who were watching the road opened fire. The taxi, out of control, crashed into the corner of Bank Street and Allenby Road and exploded causing considerable damage. One old Jewish woman died of heart failure and two Jews were injured. The Iraqi Colonel, if he was not already dead, was blown to pieces.

The same evening, 4 Mar, a Post Office van attempted to enter Bat Galim. The vehicle was halted by the legal Jewish road block there and when an Arab jumped from it and attempted to escape, he was shot. It is believed that he was a Turk, one of the local bomb experts. In the back of the van was a large bomb, ignited by hand of which the fuse had proved difficult to light.

The bomb was later destroyed by the Royal Engineers. It did not occur to me to send this more informative report to my parents, first because it seemed unwise to confide any document classified as secret through mails subject to censorship, and second because it did not convey a very comforting picture of life in Palestine.

Sometime in the first week of March Webster was informed by phone from C.RASC that only vehicles on essential business should be sent to Haifa, and that all such could be stopped and searched. Then, on 10 March, the town was placed out of bounds to all British troops between 5 in the afternoon and 7 in the morning, and, much worse from my point of view, the whole of Hadar Hacarmel (where Valentina lived) was declared out of bounds at all times. It seemed that the 6th Airborne Division had virtually abandoned any intention of maintaining order in the town once darkness fell. By day, however, it soon became apparent that patrols were exercising a control over the streets tighter than ever before. This I associated with the Division's intention of securing Haifa as the bridgehead for the evacuation. All of this made it most difficult to visit Valentina.

To enter Haifa from Nesher it was necessary to negotiate the bridge over the Wadi Rushmiyya. This huge depression on the lower slopes of Carmel divided predominately Arab parts of Haifa from predominately Jewish ones. The Arabs had established a strongpoint there from which they constantly directed sniper fire on passing Jewish vehicles. Beyond the bridge, entering Herzl Street, men of the 1st Parachute Brigade, 6th Airborne Division, maintained a roadblock. I was always stopped there and politely but firmly asked to explain where I was going. Invariably I said that I was on my way to Headquarters, C.RASC. Details were noted down on a quite formidable looking form. As a precaution, I often did briefly visit the HQ. I entered through the main gate, thereby having the Jeep's number recorded, and left a few minutes later as if I had done no more than hand in a letter or report at the office. It seemed extremely unlikely that the records of the paratroopers at Herzl Street were ever checked against those of the C.RASC sentries on Carmel Ridge, high above the town. Nonetheless, the excursions were ticklish ones, and I found my meetings with Valentina severely curtailed.

Balad esh-Sheikh

The soldiers of the Arab Liberation Army in Balad esh-Sheikh set up machine gun and mortar positions on the roofs of a number of buildings overlooking the main road to Haifa. Jewish vehicles – buses, lorries, cars or whatever – risked being fired upon whenever they used it. The people of Nesher made increasing use of the mountain road, having decided that the risk from being blown up on it was, on balance, preferable to being sniped at on the main road. To the best of our knowledge the security forces had no plans to keep open the latter provided the passage of their own vehicles was not hindered. It may have been as a result of this that the irregulars in Balad esh-Sheikh allowed McClenahan and I to continue to dip the hillside tanks though as Timekeeper Mohammed explained, we were very carefully watched since it was known on several occasions that IZL and Haganah troops had launched attacks wearing British uniforms and driving stolen British vehicles.

I had in fact constantly sought information from Mohammed about Arab matters and I realized that he was becoming more reticent. He may have thought, reasonably enough, that

bits and pieces of the news he gave me were passed on to Jewish friends and I, in turn, had no doubt whatsoever that a number of the irregulars had successfully insinuated themselves into the platoon's workforce presumably with the knowledge of the union officers including Mohammed. My feeling at this time was that the workers on the petrol installations were not heavily involved in nationalist politics. They continued to agitate for higher wages and better working conditions, but seemed to pay little heed to anything beyond the day-to-day struggle to support themselves and their families. I did note that they almost invariably referred to the irregulars as "the Syrians" though many of the workers who had lived in Balad-esh-Sheikh for years routinely identified themselves as "Syrian" for their work permits. A Field Security Section report described the situation in Haifa in terms that seemed very relevant to that in Balad esh-Sheikh more particularly: Recently a number of complaints from local Arabs have been received by members of this Section that the non-Palestinian Arab irregulars are not desired, nor willingly supported by many of the Haifa Arabs. Some Arabs have even said that were they able to, they would have the irregulars removed from the town, but that the bands had so established their position in the town that it was impossible to do so without a supporting force. According to these Arabs, the bands, by their behaviour had done little to endear themselves to the local inhabitants, and had caused considerable embarrassment and confusion to the Arab merchants and their trade.

Early in the afternoon of 13 March, two very sorry looking men came into Nesher Camp and were brought to the platoon. They were Mauritians from one of the Haifa companies of 83 Group, Pioneer Corps. They had been escorts on an Army lorry transporting flour from Haifa to Jalama. Arab irregulars had stopped them at the Balad esh-Sheikh roadblock, seized their rifles and ammunition, and commandeered the vehicle and its cargo. What happened to the driver, I asked? He was a civilian, an Arab, they said. Two of the irregulars had got into the lorry with him, and they had all driven off in the direction of Jenin. "This seems to be your department," said Webster, but as he well knew the time had long passed when I could go into Balad esh-Sheikh and register a complaint. "Anyway," Webster added, "it's really none of our business, is it?" And so we simply telephoned C.RASC in Haifa, and informed them that one of their lorries and its driver had gone missing.

Nazareth

On 14 March a delegation of workers came to see me. One of the men was very sick, they told me, and was going to die. They begged me to take him to his home in Nazareth. I agreed to do so in the interest of good labour relations but I also welcomed the opportunity to escape the routine of the installations and to see so revered a town for the first time. We filled up the platoon's jeep. I sat with the driver, and the ailing man and several of his friends distributed themselves in the rear. They talked animatedly, in an Arabic far beyond my miserably limited comprehension. It was the sick man himself who felt that politeness required that I should not be left out of the conversation. "You is very good man," he proclaimed in very broken English. He took my nod as an expression of agreement, which I suppose it was, and launched into a rapid discussion about Jews. In so far as I could follow him, he was saying that there are some good Jews "but not too much good like the English man." Again I nodded, not so much in agreement with the sentiment he was expressing (the precise sense of which was not clear to me), but rather in appreciation of the effort he was making. This appears to have inspired him to continue, and I found his next comment on "the Syrians" sufficiently interesting to record it as best I could that evening:

They are not good man. Balad esh-Sheikh man is fear of them. The Syrians make great trouble in Balad esh-Sheikh. They thief food and other thing they want. They say that you must give me this and you must give me that, and if you do not give me you will be shot. They do not love Christian man like you. They say they is come to make fight on the Jew. But then when they win the Jew, next they make fight on the Palestine people who are Christian. You, Mister Officer, will receive your reward in heaven for taking me to Nazareth...

I decided that the man was a little delirious but nevertheless it was singularly appropriate that it was on the way to Nazareth that he had reminded me that a significant number of Palestinian Arabs were Christian.

On entering Nazareth the Jeep were stopped at what I took to be a Palestine Police Post but was in fact manned by the Arab Legion. They asked where I was going. Before I could reply my passengers broke into a veritable torrent of Arabic. They seemed to be commending me for demonstrating those most highly respected of all Muslim virtues, mercy and compassion. I was quite astonished when a guard of six men turned out. As we passed through the barrier they presented arms.

Nazareth seemed extraordinarily quiet after Haifa. I saw no signs of a military presence other than the guard at the barrier. We delivered the ailing man into the bosom of his family, and perhaps it was cynical of me to wonder whether they were as delighted at his arrival as they seemed. We then drove round the town for a while, and I took a few photographs. One of them has on its reverse the cloying notation, "The town can have altered but slightly since the child Christ played in the carpenter's shop." All I can do is to plead artlessness (and a lack of prescience).

On the return journey the driver said that he did not think our sick passenger was as ill as he pretended to be. Many of our workers, he thought, were becoming very frightened. They wanted to know that they had a place to go if things in Balad esh-Sheikh got worse, so they were anxious to make contact with any relatives they could find in other towns. "We have, sir," the driver proclaimed, "been taken for a ride." If so, it was a most interesting, if uneventful, one.

The Arab Legion

On 20 March the 1st Security Company, 1st Garrison Group, Arab Legion was withdrawn from Nesher Camp. So far as I remember, we were given no advance warning of this, but we were not particularly surprised since it was common knowledge by this time that Britain had committed itself to pulling all Arab Legion troops out of Palestine before the end of the Mandate. We could not understand, however, why the 1st Security Company was being moved so early. The tanks above Balad esh-Sheikh were still, as far as we knew, classified as blue, that is, "a source of considerable inconvenience if sabotaged." Who, now, was to guard them? There was one slender clue. In one of the platoon's files I had come across a 6th Airborne Division memorandum to the effect that Arab Legion units withdrawn from Palestine should be replaced only by "imperial troops." The document was undated and heavily over-stamped, "Unamended." I knew that those companies of the Arab Legion (and for that matter of the Transjordan Frontier Force) stationed in Palestine came under command of the 6th Airborne Division, but I had no idea whether they thereby became "imperial" troops, and if so what other such troops were available to replace them. I rather thought that the detachment of Basuto Pioneers in Nesher Camp would be brought up perhaps to company strength and assigned responsibility for the petrol tanks. I was wrong. In the event the 1st Security Company, Arab Legion, was replaced by 2044 Company, 83 Regiment, Royal Pioneer Corps. The newcomers were classified as "African colonial troops." Unlike the Basuto, however, they had not been recruited from the British High Commission Territories but from the Colony of Mauritius.

The detachments of the 8th Garrison Company, Arab Legion, remained for the time being in Nesher Camp and continued to guard the oil refineries and other possible targets of terrorist attack in Haifa. McClenahan and I thus visited the platoon's tanks above Balad esh-Sheikh where Mauritian Pioneers guarded petrol supplied from refineries in Haifa guarded by the Arab Legion. The whole matter was the subject of much discussion at Miriam's Café in Nesher. Praff and his friends were delighted that the 1st Security Company of the Arab Legion had been pulled out of Nesher but remained uneasy at the continuing presence of troops of the 8th Garrison Company. As they pointed out, the poorly equipped Nesher unit of the Haganah Guard Force would be unlikely to be able to hold Nesher against attack by a well-armed and well-trained Arab Legion force. All I could say was that 376 Petrol Platoon had nothing to do with the Garrison Company other than sharing camp; that I myself had

never even met any of their officers; but that I was as sure as I could be that they would also be withdrawn from Palestine before the end of the Mandate. On this, as it turned out, I was right, but I also remembered from conversations with David that in his view the withdrawal of the Arab Legion to its bases in Transjordan was just a way of transferring British war materials – vehicles, arms, ammunition, and other supplies – to King Abdullah. The Legion would become the Transjordan Army, and there would be nothing to stop it then being used, once the Mandate was ended, in the invasion of Palestine. On this, as it turned out, David was right.

Wadi Rushmiyya

From Nesher Camp, throughout the night of Sunday, 21 March, we could again hear sounds of almost continuous small arms and heavy machine gun fire, punctuated by several massive explosions that reverberated in the hills above us. I felt very uneasy, and asked Webster's permission to go into Haifa the next day. "Worried about your lady friend, are you?" he asked. I thought it best to be honest. "Yes," I replied. He was very sympathetic. "We'll make it official," he said; "There's a letter I want hand-delivered to C.RASC." I thanked him. He was then quite abrupt. "Whatever else you do will not be on my orders. Get yourself in trouble and I shall make that quite clear." That was fair enough, I thought.

One of the platoon's drivers whom I liked well was eager to make the trip. It was still early morning when we approached Wadi Rushmiyya. It was obvious that heavy fighting had been going on and I could see one artillery piece positioned across the bridge below Herzl Street. We did not stop and stare! To my surprise the single paratrooper on duty at the roadblock casually waved us through. Herzl Street was eerily deserted and no British troops (or for that matter, Jewish ones) were in sight. We took (Haifa's) Mountain Road to Headquarters, C.RASC, and I dutifully delivered Webster's letter. I knew that it would be extremely unwise to drive into Hadar Hacarmel which, as far as I knew, was still out of bounds to all British personnel and, much to the point, was doubtless known to be such to the Jewish street-fighters. I decided that we should seek the safety of the port area where the security forces were fully in control. My idea was to try to phone Valentina from the bookshop. In Harbour Street we saw the results of one of what must have been one of the explosions we had heard in Nesher the night before. Two or three Jewish stores had been destroyed. A policeman was on duty there to prevent looting. I asked him what had happened. He said that a van filled with explosives had been used. Five Jews were killed and many others wounded, some by sniper fire after the explosion.

The driver and I were sitting in the Jeep surveying the destruction when to our utter surprise a further explosion occurred. Our vehicle shook perceptibly. We could not see target of the attack, but could hear the crashes of falling masonry. "I think it's time to get out, sir," the driver said. I had to agree. Remembering the artillery piece at the Wadi Rushmiyya, I decided that we would return by Allenby Road to the top of Mount Carmel and drive south-eastwards to take Nesher's mountain road to camp. The driver approved. I reported to Webster. "Did you deliver my letter?" he asked. I said I had. "Did you see your lady friend?" I said I had not. "Well, duty first," he remarked, cheerfully.

We learned about the events of 21-22 March some days later, from the usual intelligence summaries. There had indeed been heavy fighting between Arabs and Jews at the Wadi Rushmiyya. A 2nd Lieut. of the 3rd Hussars had tried to evacuate wounded Jews from the bridge, and had been hit in the head by Arab sniper fire. As for the explosion that had rocked our Jeep, we learned that it had been a Jewish reprisal for the previous day's attack in Harbour Street. A vehicle packed with explosives was left in nearby Iraq Street, and on detonation killed four Arabs and wounded about 20 others. The intelligence report suggested that the reprisal bore the stamp of the IZL or Stern Group, for the men who carried it out wore British Army uniforms.

376 Petrol Platoon

A communication from C.RASC dated 21 March reached Webster the next day. He showed it to me on my return from Haifa. It was to the effect that a short course on malaria

was to be held in Haifa the following week and Webster was to send one of his officers to attend it. I volunteered eagerly, but so had McClenahan who had already seen the notice and had pointed out to Webster that I had been fortunate enough to spend two weeks in Egypt and that he, McClenahan, was now due for a break! Fortunately my good friend overplayed his hand. He said that since I had been specially trained to serve the platoon as its fire officer, it would be an honour for him to be equipped to serve as its malaria expert. "Bloody silly nonsense," Webster said, and told the Chief Clerk to inform C.RASC that Mr. Wilks will attend the course. I was elated, reckoning that I would thereby obtain easier access to Valentina's part of town.

A minor breach of army regulations had occurred in Nesher Camp on 21 March when Cpl. W. J. McKnight had absented himself from camp without leave at 19.30 hours and had not returned until 06.30 hours on 22 March. He had failed to comply with the current Haifa Security State regulations requiring those leaving camp to carry arms and to move in fours. Major A. J. Dewar D.S.O., who was then Officer in Command of Troops, Nesher Camp, signed a charge sheet at 17.30 on the 22nd. I knew nothing of his matter until Capt. Kenyon, currently the Camp's security officer, came to the platoon mess that evening with the charge sheet and several pages of evidence that he wanted our Chief Clerk to type and hand over to me by early morning. I was then to take them to Major Dewar who was conducting the hearing of McKnight's case and had asked for an officer from 376 Petrol Platoon to be present as an observer. Kenyon told me that Dewar was something of a martinet, and that he was taking the McKnight matter very seriously since several soldiers under his command had recently deserted.

It turned out that McKnight was married; that his wife was staying in Haifa; that he had decided to sneak off on the Sunday to spend a little time with her, so ignoring the Haifa Security State regulations; that he had fallen asleep and had woken up too late to return to camp until the next morning. I felt a great deal of sympathy for the unfortunate corporal and was surprised by the intensity with which the case was pursued. McKnight was given a jail sentence, a short one to be sure. I thought it unnecessary in the circumstances and would have docked McKnight a day's pay and let the matter rest.

Valentina

Only half a dozen officers had been culled from their units to be initiated into the mysteries of malaria. A Field Hygiene Section of the Royal Army Medical Corps provided us with tents in their camp on the crest of Carmel. It was a quite delightful spot. The mornings were taken up with lectures and visits to hospitals. After lunch we were urged "to go over our notes," and after that no one seemed to have any interest in what we did for the rest of the day. Hadar Hacarmel was only a short taxi drive away. I was able to spend many hours with Valentina throughout the five days of the course. We visited beautiful parks and gardens, paid our respects to the Bahai Temple, and enjoyed excellent restaurants and bars. The latter, I noted in the diary, "were packed with people, despite the daily shootings and bombing." But the diary also describes an event that lives on vividly in memory.

On one particular day it had been impossible to get away from the Field Hygiene Section until early evening. I therefore phoned Valentina to say that I would meet her at the Piccadilly, a bar that had been very popular with British officers before the imposition of curfews and other such security requirements. We were sitting at the very back of the lounge, a location furthest from the door that opened to the street and therefore relatively safe from gunfire from cruising vehicles. On this particular evening the bar door was flung open and three men with Sten guns entered. They were in uniform, their American-style helmets proclaiming them to be "IZL" and their armbands reading "MP." They began to work from table to table, demanding the papers of all customers. I remember thinking that these Irgun Zvai Leumi military policemen looked considerably tougher than their red-capped British counterparts. I was extremely alarmed. Since I had come directly from the Field Hygiene Section to the Piccadilly I had had no opportunity of leaving my gun with Valentina's janitor. It was tucked in my belt under my shirt. The most ridiculous scenarios took shape in my mind as the three men worked their way nearer and nearer. Should I ceremoniously surrender

my gun, stick my hands above my head, and refer to the Geneva Convention? Should I open fire on the men when they were near enough for me not to miss – but to hit one, perhaps; to hit two, unlikely; to hit three, impossible. Valentina spoke softly. It's all right," she said, "just sit still. Show them your Army service book if they ask." One of the men did ask. He wanted to know what I was doing in Hadar Hacarmel. With Valentina beside me and a bottle of wine before us, I thought the answer was rather obvious. Only the book of verse was missing. Fortunately Valentina saved me from making the point, which might not have gone over all that well. She spoke to the man at some length in Hebrew, after which he gave me a friendly slap on the shoulder, said "O.K. buddy," and proceeded to the next table.

It was not nonchalance but shock that made me say, fatuously in the circumstances, "He seemed a nice chap; American, I think, from his accent." Valentina rightly ignored the remark. I felt sure that she knew him. He had told her, she said, that IZL patrols were looking for deserters from Haganah. This was the first direct evidence I had that the two Jewish organizations were indeed currently cooperating. I commented on this to Valentina, and added something to the effect that I could not really approve of the development. "It may have just saved your life," Valentina commented, rather testily. I was not at all sure what I should read into her remark.

If my memory is correct it was that very night that I first stayed in Valentina's flat. She said that it was not a very good idea for me to be on the streets with the IZL patrolling them. I had to agree. It was to be the first time that we slept together. I knew, but Valentina did not, that it was the first time that I had slept with any woman. Adolescence in wartime had been long and intensely frustrating. I had certainly done nothing to avoid women, but my efforts to woo one or another had been quite unrewarded. I probably ran at about par for those of my generation and background (though may seem unbelievable in these days of sexual liberation). And so, on that night in Hadar Hacarmel, late in March, I was anxious, awkward, clumsy, maladroit, and I knew how generous she was being in telling me what a good lover I was.

The next morning I woke up feeling elated. It was not so much that I thought my relationship with Valentina had achieved a new level; indeed, I was unsure whether or not it had. It was rather that I felt I had made a rite de passage, a significant change in status. I explored this distinction at some length in my diary when I arrived back in Nesher Camp that night (and later excised the passages as best forgotten). In the meantime I had to return to the Field Hygiene Section for the final morning session. Valentina suggested that I meet David in the afternoon; he had said that he would like to see me. I promised to try to find him but pointed out that I would have to be in 376 Petrol Platoon by dinnertime.

David

I met David at the Piccadilly and told him about my experience there the night before. He seemed to think it quite amusing and said that Piccadilly girls were more than a match for IZL military police. I had never thought of Valentina in quite that way before. David said that he wanted to talk to me because the situation was changing rapidly. Haganah Intelligence reported that the Arab Liberation Army was not willing to follow Arab League policy by deferring all military operations until the end of the Mandate. Fawzi el-Kawukji was planning to so weaken Haifa that it would fall to his troops as soon as the British forces were withdrawn. To this end el-Kawukji was adopting two plans. The first was to demoralize the Jewish community in Haifa town by stepping up the bombing of buildings, and the second was to attack and destroy outlying Jewish settlements. I thought that this was much in line with what Mahdi Bey had told me in February. I said this to David. What is different, he replied, is that the real struggle for Haifa is now beginning. We have information that an Arab who had been trained in explosives in Germany during the war had now been brought into Haifa, and had probably been responsible for the recent bombing in Harbour Street. I said that I understood that Fawzi el-Kawukji had also been in Nazi Germany.

David said that I should excuse him for a minute. He spoke to a man standing at the bar and then brought him over to our table. David introduced him as Avram and said that he was doing research in Jerusalem on Arabs in Nazi Germany. He was not the Avram I had met

briefly in January. David told him that I had recently met Mahdi Bey. Avram was interested. Did he tell you that he is from Iraq and is known there as Mohammed Bey Mahdi, Avram asked? I said he had not (though I was unsure without my notes to consult). He likes to tell people, Avram continued, that he was on the winning English side in the First World War, but he doesn't talk of having been on the losing German side in the last war. I had to agree that Mahdi Bey had not mentioned this as we had chatted in Balad esh-Sheikh.

David broke in to say that he and I had been discussing Fawzi el-Kawukji when he, Avram, had joined us, and that there seemed to be no doubt that he was commander-in-chief of the Arab Liberation Army and that Mahdi Bey was second-in-command. Avram agreed. Fawzi, he said, was often addressed as Fawzi Bey. He was Syrian or Lebanese by origin but little is known about his early career. We do know that he spent much of the war in Nazi Germany and we believe that it was then that he and Mahdi Bey became collaborators.

I had heard, I commented, of other Arab nationalists who had worked with the Nazis, the Mufti of Jerusalem for example. Yes, Avram said, Haj Amin el-Husseini was one of Hitler's principal advisers on Arab affairs and was working, so it is believed, on plans for exterminating the Jews in Palestine once the German armies had pushed across the Suez Canal to take over the Mandate. This, of course, never happened. I asked Avram whether the Mufti was Palestinian by origin. Indeed he was, said Avram. He was born into a powerful family in Jerusalem. He grew up to serve as an officer in the Turkish Army, but in the course of the First World War he became involved in Arab nationalist movements and so came to be fighting against the Ottomans and in support of Sharif Hussein of Mecca. As a result of this, when Britain was granted the Palestine Mandate in 1920, Amin el-Husseini became Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, the most holy city after Mecca for Muslims. Avram looked at his watch, said he had a train to catch, and walked off quite unceremoniously. David remarked that Avram seemed eager to convince us of his knowledgeability! I thought so too, but nevertheless would have liked to have heard more.

David ordered whisky for us on the grounds that he had something serious to say. I am sure that you have realized that "David" is a code name, and I have not concealed from you that I am in Haganah. I want to explain this a little further now. I am in a branch specifically concerned with building up Jewish strength in both weaponry and personnel. That is why you may have noted my anger at your country's decision to prevent arms legally purchased abroad from being landed in Palestine, and as you know from the newspapers Jewish refugees from Europe are not being allowed to land here. Now, said David, I have full access to Haganah Intelligence and this is the picture that is emerging. There have never been very good relations between the Mufti, Amin el-Husseini on the one hand, and Fawzi el-Kawukji on the other. These two had common goals, first to establish Palestine as an independent Arab state on the termination of the British Mandate, and second, to eradicate Zionism as being a destabilizing force within the new state. Haganah Intelligence was now indicating that the Mufti and Fawzi el-Kawukji had reached a provisional understanding rather than a long-term agreement, that the former should have operational command within southern Palestine and the latter within northern.

I was not at all sure where David's remarks were leading. I said that what he was telling me about the situation was not so very different from what I had gathered from British Intelligence reports. David found this amusing. I can assure you, he said, that our analysts have access to your files, carefully evaluate them, and make use of what is thought to be sound. I had little doubt that David was telling the truth. I said as much to him, to be told that he had not yet come to his point. We are, he said, in the midst of a critical debate about strategy. When the Mandate ends we do not think we have the resources to hold all those parts of Palestine awarded us under the United Nations Partition Plan. There is a question of priorities. Some say that we must retain control of Jerusalem at whatever cost. The notion of an Israel without Jerusalem is unthinkable. The contrary view is that no Jewish state could be established without control of Haifa, the deep-sea port through which the bulk of Israel's international trade would have to be directed. I am very strongly of this view, David said, so you will understand why I regard Fawzi el-Kawukji as particularly dangerous. He, too, appreciates the critical importance of Haifa.

I remembered how impressed I had been with Mahdi Bey and I told David that I had noted in my diary that if he was at all typical of the officer class in the Arab Liberation Army, then I thought the Jews truly did have an opponent to worry about. David said that they certainly must not underestimate the enemy, but should prepare for different eventualities. The worst possible scene is that first, British security forces continued to disallow the Yishuv either to import arms from abroad or to provide a homeland for all Jewish refugees displaced by the war; second, that because of his superiority in arms Fawzi el-Kawukji will be able to dominate the rural surrounds of Haifa and control access to other than from the sea; third, that as soon as British troops are withdrawn from the Haifa Enclave and Haifa Port, Fawzi el-Kawukji's forces will take over the former British positions and secure control of the oil refineries, so effectively aborting the birth of the new Jewish nation. It could not survive without oil. David paused. "But things will not go this way, will they?" he said.

I had no idea what to say. The fact of the matter was that I thought that things might indeed go just that way. I remarked rather lamely that I could see how critically important oil would be to Jewish forces committed to the defence of Haifa. "Exactly," David said, "you've got it." I was not sure what the "it" was that I had apparently got, but David went on to make it clear. The oil producers in the Arab League would cut off supplies to the Haifa refineries and cease to maintain the pipelines. Israel would have to depend on whatever fuel was immediately available from on-shore storage tanks or could become rapidly available from offshore tankers in the port. However we secure our supply of vehicle fuel, however, we shall need some way of making it available to our defence forces. We shall, in other words, need your petrol platoon with its installations and tanks to carry out much the same functions as it does now for the British troops.

I finally saw David's point, but thought the reasoning flawed. You forget, I said, that the pipelines from the platoon's tanks pass through Balad esh-Skeikh which is an Arab stronghold. "That," said David, "will be a problem for us, not for you." I pointed out that we had no idea of what plans there were for the evacuation of 376 Petrol Platoon. We thought it most likely, I said, that as the evacuation gathered momentum sufficient supplies of petrol would be available in the port to supply the remaining units. At that point we supposed that the officers and men of 376 Petrol Platoon would be transferred to some transit camp in the Enclave and that the Royal Engineers would move in and demolish the installations and living quarters. David said that only time would tell, that he hoped I was wrong but realized that things might well go that way. "We are not asking you to do anything," he said. "We are asking you to do nothing."

I arrived back in Nesher Camp a little late for dinner. I apologized. Webster jocularly remarked on how well I looked. "It must have been a wonderful course," he said. I nodded; "It was, Sir." McClenahan then asked if I would mind taking a look at a mosquito in his tent. I ignored the request. We had never paid much heed to the prohibition on discussing business over dinner. In fact the vagaries of British policy in Palestine were conversational staples, and often left us unanimously baffled. I therefore had no hesitation in giving an account of the conversation I had just had with David. His enigmatic concluding remark about our not doing anything but doing nothing particularly intrigued Webster, as well it might. I excused myself and retired to my tent. The small table at which I wrote looked pathetically neglected, and the oil lamp that the batman had lit flickered uncertainly. I had made no entry in my diary while I had been away, and I wanted to record the conversation with David while it was still fresh in my mind.

CHAPTER SIX

EARLIER APRIL 1948

376 Petrol Platoon

On 1 April I was Duty Officer. That evening I received a telephone call from Naftali Praff in Nesher. "Your Africans have been in a crash," he said, "a mile or two south of here." I realized that he meant the Basuto pioneers, about 25 of whom had been guarding signal boxes along the railway between Nesher and Kiryat Haroshet. At this time they were taken to and from work on an open three-ton Dodge that was provided by 4 Petrol Station Company, and I assumed that this was the vehicle involved in the accident. I assembled as many of the platoon's men as I could rapidly muster, and we set off in our one and only lorry at top speed, which must have been a dashing 40 mph or thereabouts. We found the Dodge overturned at the foot of the embankment over which the road ran. I had expected mangled bodies and broken limbs galore, but no one had suffered other than minor injuries. The Basuto were wandering about aimlessly, dazed by what had happened. Several of them were singing, quietly, what I took to be a hymn.

The driver of the stricken vehicle said he had been forced off the road by a Jewish armoured bus. "Was it deliberate?" I asked. He was quite sure it was not. Rather nobly, I thought, he took the blame. He had given way a little too generously to the formidable looking armoured vehicle approaching him, he said, and had gone over the crumbling edge of the narrow road. I did not think the driver was culpable, and he was not charged with any offence. I found it difficult to believe, however, that the Jewish driver had not realized what had happened, and I would have expected him to stop. It was not a good show, as Webster remarked later.

Since the end of February it had been public knowledge that the 6th Airborne Division would be disbanded before the end of the Mandate, and its constituent units reassigned to other commands. The reasoning behind this decision was not, of course, made known at the time. Webster thought it most inappropriate granted the splendid combat record of the Division in Germany. McClenahan and I, however, were of the opinion that the Division was not functioning efficiently as a peacekeeping rather than a fighting force, and I think that this view was shared by many of the junior officers serving in the later stages of the Mandate. We had also noted with some surprise that the 40th Commando, Royal Marines, was brought into Palestine and deployed in and around Haifa Port. We first became aware of their presence in early March (or perhaps late February). It was only at the beginning of April, however, that the situation began to resolve itself.

With a whimsical sense of the calendar, the powers that be decided that the 6th Airborne Division would cease to exist on 1 April. We knew nothing of this, of course, when we were congratulating ourselves on the miraculous escapes of our Basuto pioneers. Two or three days in fact elapsed before we heard that the Division had been officially disbanded, and that primary responsibility for the maintenance of law and order in the Haifa Sub-District of North Palestine had passed from the 1st Parachute Brigade to the 1st Guards Brigade. Most of the former constituents of the defunct Airborne Division were evacuated to the United Kingdom in April and we found ourselves unusually busy at the platoon's remaining working installation. Armoured cars of the 3rd Hussars came in from their base at Ramat David, some 16 miles south-east of Haifa, and we learned first, that its squadrons had been transferred from the former Airborne to the current 1st Guards Brigade, and second, that it had been assigned responsibility for the protection of 376 Petrol Platoon (a matter that McClenahan and I found ironic, granted that we regarded its raid on Balad esh-Sheikh as having endangered our lives!) Otherwise 376 Petrol Platoon was relatively little disturbed by the extensive reorganization necessitated by the withdrawal of the Airborne Division though on visits to Haifa, of course, we were very much aware that troops of the 1st Parachute Brigade had been replaced by ones of the Guards while Marine Commandos (also by then under command of the Guards) were much in evidence in the Port area.

As of the beginning of April we had received nothing from C.RASC that gave us any information about the future of 376 Petrol Platoon. We heard that several supply and transport companies were being moved overland to Egypt and there were vague rumours that some of these were ultimately destined for Kenya. We also knew that 193rd Bulk Petrol Transport Company at Jalama, which was one of our principal distributors, was being closed down. We might too, so we speculated, find ourselves surplus to requirements and thus be evacuated from Palestine within a few weeks.

One afternoon Webster decided to pay a visit to C.RASC, something he rarely did unless summoned. He felt, he said, that it was high time he was given a clearer picture of the Platoon's place in the scheme of things. On his return he said that he had succeeded in obtaining very limited information. No date had been fixed for the platoon's evacuation. It was a static unit and much of its equipment and stocks would have to be destroyed. C.RASC recognized the increasingly isolated position of the Platoon, and confirmed that the 3rd Hussars and 317th Field Security Section had both been alerted to this problem. "And that's about it," Webster said, "the situation stinks." McClenahan and I agreed (as did a third subaltern who was briefly on our strength). A lengthy diary entry for 5 April conveyed something of the exasperation felt at this particular juncture. "The whole of the army organization in this area is in a state of complete disintegration," I wrote, and commented, "it has become quite apparent to us that large quantities of surplus British materiel have passed into Arab hands in Haifa." I went on to note the sense we had of being left behind as British troops in North Palestine became increasingly concentrated in Haifa Town and Haifa Port, and wrote,

...we now lie outside the perimeter, and the set-up is surrealistic. We are in closer touch with Haganah in Nesher than we are with our own Headquarters in Haifa. Even more oddly, the people in Balad esh-Sheikh have come to regard us as intermediaries between themselves and Haganah, and at this local level people still talk of an understanding between the two places. But this is the Arab mukhtar and his followers – who have a stake in the land, indeed, whose land this is. The Arab Liberation Army men in Balad esh-Sheikh say that they will destroy Nesher the moment the Mandate ends. I don't know what we can do; we have no authority of any sort, and we have very few combatant soldiers here. Even our own men are dispirited and demoralized.

I am unsure what I meant by my reference to the Platoon being "outside the perimeter." At this time the Haifa Enclave existed only as a plan. The Platoon was still within North Palestine District, so I suppose I was voicing our sense that the Army was no longer exercising regular and continuous control over the locality of Balad esh-Sheikh and Nesher, and was more or less leaving us to our own devices.

In early April one particular event in Nesher Camp greatly distressed us. A 376 Petrol Platoon corporal was in charge of the armoury. One night he and several others on duty with him indulged themselves in a game of Russian roulette. Our corporal was unfortunate. He died instantly.

Webster

Webster received a communication from C.RASC a few days after his visit to HQ, Haifa. He read out its contents. "You have been appointed second-in-command of 376 Petrol Platoon," he said; "Isn't that good news?" I said, "Thank you, sir; I shall try to do my best." Webster snorted. "I don't know about that," he said, "but this must mean that I am going to be sent home for demobilization very soon, so you will probably have to take over temporarily, either until a new commanding officer is appointed or the Platoon is disbanded." I knew that Webster was right. No officer of rank lower than captain could be in permanent command of a static unit of the kind represented by 376 Petrol Platoon.

"Would you please ask Mr. McClenahan to see me and I'll explain the situation to him," Webster said. After McClenahan had reappeared we got together to compare notes. I wondered whether the letter from C.RASC would prove a source of friction between us since

it had never been clear whether he or I had seniority. McClenahan was commissioned a short time before me, but I by then served a lengthy time as an Officer Cadet in the Indian Army. None of us had been sure exactly how such matters were calculated, but the issue had never been of any significance before. McClenahan knew what was troubling me. He smiled. "Don't you realize," he said, "that this has nothing to do with you or me at all?" I asked him what he meant. Webster, he said, had obviously raised the matter with C.RASC on his recent visit to Haifa and had asked for one of us to be named as second-in-command. He was clearly worried that his return to the United Kingdom for demobilization would be delayed unless there was someone to take over the Platoon.

We talked this over and found we both had considerable sympathy for Webster's situation. We thought that he had been called up in 1939 or 1940, and we knew that he had served in the British Army in India where he had commanded an RASC company as Major Webster. We felt sure that by 1947, with the withdrawal of British troops from India, he had anticipated repatriation to the UK and swift demobilization. Instead of this he found himself in command of 376 Petrol Platoon in Palestine with his substantive rank of Captain. His bitterness, we assumed, was further fuelled as vessels – Samaria, Franconia, Otranto and imminently, Empress of Australia and Empress of Scotland – arrived at Haifa Port and steamed away carrying home troops of the 6th Airborne Division. And so two subalterns decided that Webster could scarcely be blamed for acting as he had. At a more mundane level we wondered whether a second-in-command received any salary supplement and concluded that this was most unlikely since we already drew active service allowances. In any case, McClenahan assured me, he would prefer not to live under the shadow of having to run a platoon even if only temporarily. I rapidly came to appreciate his sentiments when Webster gave me my first task as his second-in-command. This was, I well remember, to write to the mother of our dead armoury corporal. I could not bear to convey the sheer senselessness of the incident to her. I told her that her son had shot himself accidentally, "in the line of duty. McClenahan and I remained the best of friends.

The Arms Dump

It was still early in April that instructions reached the Platoon from HQ North Palestine District. These had to do with our weaponry. We should hold no more than one sidearm with fifty rounds of ammunition per man. All surpluses were to be dumped in the sea at specified locations in the Bay of Acre. Webster said that he would himself make the necessary arrangements. McClenahan and I thought this uncharacteristic of our superior officer. We pointed out that, granted the sorry state of the Platoon's transport, we might have to make several trips to the shore. Two or three days later Webster said that we should be ready to move. McClenahan would keep the installations running. I would take the Platoon's 3-tonner with half a dozen of our Arab labourers to manhandle the crates, and he himself would use his Jeep to move whatever my ailing vehicle could not take.

I made my run. Somewhere between Haifa and Acre there was a sergeant manning a small post where a rough track branched off from the main road. It led across the marshes to the shore. The sergeant made an entry in a log that recorded the units participating in what came to be referred to as the Great Dump. It was a most unpleasant drive to the water. Our labourers hauled the crates of guns and ammunition through the stinking mud and into the (not-so-) deep water. And that was that. I was rather surprised that Webster had not arrived. I queried the sergeant at the main road. He was sure no other vehicle from Nesher Camp had passed through, but pointed out that there were several other routes to the beach. On returning to the Platoon I reported to Webster and asked him if his dump had gone well? "Splendid," he said, "I had some help that made the job very easy." Unable to contain my curiosity, I asked for clarification. Webster beamed at me. "Praff and several of our friends in Nesher came over," he told me, "and generously offered to dump the stuff for me." I was astounded. I realized that a sizable part of our surplus must now be in the Nesher Cement Works. This was not exactly how I had understood David's remark that he wanted the Platoon to do nothing. My immediate guess was that the Nesher Haganah Guard Force unit had taken the initiative in this matter and that Haganah Acquisitions had probably not

authorized it. I made a mental note to ask David about this, but in the meantime decided to confront Webster since he had obviously involved himself in private negotiations with the Nesher people.

Confrontations with one's senior officers are usually best avoided but in this case I thought it unlikely that Webster would let the matter go further. I was in fact not at all sure of my own feelings. To supply the Jews with old and battered jerricans was one thing. Firearms and ammunition were another. I was certainly not ill disposed towards the Palestinian Arabs, and I had come to like working with them. I pointed this out to Webster. "I take these things very seriously," he said, "but you must remember that it is not your workers who are leading the Liberation Army. It is men who collaborated with the Nazis and came to believe that the Jews should be exterminated." Webster asked me if I remembered our encounter with a Royal Engineers major in Nesher Camp, who had told us how easier our life would be if only Hitler had completely rid the world of Jews! I could indeed recollect the occasion and had recorded it in the diary. "So that," said Webster, "is why I'm prepared to help them." At this point in the conversation I decided to press him on the nature of his arrangement with Nesher's Haganah unit. His answer took me completely by surprise. "Praff," he said, "talked the matter over and suggested that a handgun should be valued at £ (Palestinian) 15 and ammunition at around £1 for 10,000 rounds. I was taken aback. I had been brought up to think of arms trading as reprehensible. I said something to that effect to Webster. His reply took me by surprise and I can recollect only the gist of it. "I am," he said or words to that effect, "a businessman by profession and I was doing business with Praff. I was giving him a good deal because they would rather get a bargain from a businessman than receive a free gift from a do-gooder." I was more than a little impressed by this gem of capitalistic wisdom.

McClenahan had not been party to this conversation. Webster wondered whether he should be put in the picture. I thought he should, but as it turned out the question was a purely rhetorical one. The three of us spent several hours in deep discussion that evening. Webster obviously had no intention of defending his arrangement with Praff. Indeed, he calmly informed McClenahan and me that he had agreed through Praff to assist the Jews not only with empty jerricans but with modest supplies of full ones. McClenahan was obviously discomfited. He pointed out that since he was in charge of the working installation he would inevitably become involved in Webster's dealings with Praff. Webster said that this was not so; that he was referring to the thousands of gallons that were already in the Platoon's stacks and would most likely fall into the hands of Fawzi el-Kawukji and his followers. This, Webster proclaimed, would be contrary to law. McClenahan and I should realize that under the United Nations' Partition Plan both Nesher and Balad esh-Sheikh would become part of the Jewish State the authorities of which should inherit all that we do not or could not take with us. Webster's badly flawed reasoning carried the day. McClenahan and I felt assured that we were doing the right thing in diverting our surpluses to the Jews, but we also felt something like embarrassment at the petty level of our intervention in the political scene. A rumour was circulating that its crew had sold a British tank to the Jews for £25,000. My own estimate was that 376 Petrol Platoon held about 50,000 rounds of ammunition in all. Even treating the total as surplus, no more than £5 or so would have been transacted in Nesher for ammunition.

On this note our discussion ended. I chatted with McClenahan in his tent for a few minutes. There was little to say. We were all agreed on assisting the Jews but we both expressed surprise, first that Webster had never suggested any division of Nesher's payments and second, that neither of us had thought to raise the matter. It was simply not an issue and we had no interest in making it one. I personally felt that some that some turning point had been reached – and passed irreversibly. I wanted to explore this in my diary, but knew it inadvisable. The result was an entry that was brief but still uncharacteristically imprudent:

One group of our officers took the decision that surplus petrol cans, petrol and ammunition will go to Haganah rather than to the Arab Army units. The Nazi background of several of the Arab leaders weighs heavily here. The decision is an agonizing one. The Cement Works will be the off-loading point.

Yagur

I spent many quiet evenings in Nesher with Praff and his cronies, sometimes at their homes and sometimes at Miriam's café. Among the many stories I heard was one about a British raid on Yagur. It had occurred on 29 June 1946, but the tale was told with such intensity and vividness that at first I had thought the raid a very recent one. Yagur, I learned, had been one of the major weapons depots of Haganah. Some six hundred small arms, light machine guns and mortars had been seized, representing a blow to Haganah such that the day has gone down in tradition as Black Saturday.

Yagur, about three miles from Nesher on the Jenin road, was a large kibbutz of about 1,500 people that extended over some 5,000 acres of land. Founded in 1928, it belonged to a movement, Kibbutz Hame'uhad, which, like Hashomer Hatzai, was committed to the twin ideals of socialism and Zionism. Relations between Yagur and Nesher, the one a kibbutz and the other a moshava or village, were very close. "They grew up together," Praff would say; "they were like twins, but not identical ones." So when, on 7 April, he said that he was just going to Yagur and asked if I would like to join him, I accepted the offer eagerly. David had told me much about life on a kibbutz, but I had never until then had the chance of visiting one.

I was, of course, in uniform, and I sensed an immediate tension among the guards at the entrance to Yagur. Praff spoke to them, presumably presenting me as a friend of the Jews, and all was well. I was shown around much of the settlement, and was highly impressed by all I saw. It presented a side of Jewish life quite different from anything I had encountered before. That evening I wrote:

The settlement was extremely attractive – the kindergartens, the schools, the weaving sheds, even the cowsheds. Again I saw girls, milking the cows, with horrifying blue numbers tattooed on their arms. Some were children when this was done, and growth had distorted the figures.

A visit to the dentist's surgery was fascinating. One white overalled man, with a delicate face and a small beard, had the task of making false teeth. He was a French Jew, and an artist and sculptor of some renown, and in his spare time he used the plaster for more aesthetic purposes. An exhibition of his work was to be held in November at the Anglo-French Art Centre, and this to him seemed more real than all that was happening around him. The shadow of the concentration camps lies heavily over Yagur, and the people seem to feel that nothing can ever be as bad again. Perhaps they are right.

Subsequently I learned more about the British raid on Yagur. It was in fact part of an ambitious attempt by the 6th Airborne Division to destroy Jewish paramilitary organizations throughout Palestine. The arrest of senior Jewish commanders, especially from the Palmach, was the principal purpose of the operation. It was not intended as a sweep for arms. Nevertheless, for whatever reason, Yagur was subjected to a draconian search that lasted for three days, and yielded massive quantities of arms and explosives concealed in thirty or so skilfully constructed caches located throughout the settlement.

Mishmar Ha'emek

I had not been entirely surprised when, on 4 April, the Arab Liberation Army launched an assault on Mishmar Ha'emek. The kibbutz was only about eleven miles from Nesher Camp, on the Jenin road, and we fancied we could hear the sounds of heavy artillery fire. I was more surprised to see David in Haifa two or three days later for Mishmar Ha'emek was his natal settlement and I had rather assumed that he would be there with his wife and children. He seemed to want to talk. Haganah Intelligence, he said, knew that Fawzi el-Kawukji had crossed into Palestine from Damascus two or three weeks before and had then planned the operation against Mishmar Ha'emek. Mahdi Bey ("your old friend," David commented) had been put in charge of the actual attack. I noticed that David now referred to the ALA as the Yarmuk Army, presumably because its lines of supply passed through the canyons of the river of that name that flows into the Jordan below Lake Tiberias. Be that as it may, Fawzi el-Kawukji's intention was now to build up his base at Jenin and create a forward position at

Mishmar Ha'emek where he could marshal his troops and build up his armament. At present Balad esh-Sheikh was too vulnerable to be used for this purpose on account of its proximity to Haifa though ultimately, David said, as soon as the Mandate ended el-Kawukji probably intended to launch his major attack on Haifa through it.

I thought it probably indiscreet to ask David about his current situation and he did not volunteer any information. Back in Nesher Camp I made a point of seeing what Mohammed had to say about the attack on Mishmar Ha'emek. He was quite forthcoming. Some of the "Syrians" had left Balad esh-Sheikh to join in the attack, he told me, but others remained to keep the road to Mishmar Ha'emek closed to Jewish reinforcements. I noted an unmistakeable change in the attitude of the Arab labourers. They had always been less than enthusiastic about the arrival of the irregulars in Balad esh-Sheikh. With the opening of the offensive against Mishmar Ha'emek, however, their outlook seemed to change. They knew that Fawzi el-Kawukji – or Fawzi Bey as they said – had ordered the attack, and spoke of him with something approaching awe. He was, for them, a hero of the Arab Revolt of 1936-39 who had fought the British and escaped into Iraq. Curiously, their other hero was Sami Taha whose virtues Mohammed had extolled in December. The two made, I thought, an interesting contrast, the one a rightwing military leader and the other a leftwing labour organizer. Be that as it may, no one appeared to have any firsthand knowledge of the situation in Mishmar Ha'emek.

I hoped to learn more in Nesher but quickly realised that there was no question of any of the 20 or 30 members of the Haganah Guard in the village being thrown into the fighting. They were simply not equipped for heavy combat. The unit had, however, a role in the battle. This was to set up a post on the main Haifa-Jenin road to attempt to prevent Arab reinforcements and supplies from Haifa reaching el-Kawukji's forces. This greatly raised tension locally since the new Nesher post was only a couple of hundred yards or so from that previously set up by the Arab irregulars. The latter, however, were not seriously discommoded. I myself saw several convoys of armoured cars and lorries drive through the Nesher checkpoint at high speeds. Many of the vehicles were ex-army ones that still displayed British insignia. The Jews held their fire, uncertain of the identity of the convoy. Sometimes this was resolved when a few bursts of automatic fire from one or other of the vehicles were fired off in the direction of Nesher village (by which time it was usually too late to respond effectively).

The engagement at Mishmar Ha'emek continued unabated on 9 April, when my diary entry reads, "the sound of the fighting reverberates in the hills, and the settlers must be undergoing terrible sufferings." Most of our news came from the Palestine Post. It was reported that a detachment of the 3rd Hussars had entered Mishmar Ha'emek and had succeeded in negotiating a temporary cease-fire to permit the evacuation of children from the settlement.

It was just after Shabat had ended, so it must have been the evening of 10 April that I met Valentina at the Piccadilly in Hadar Hacarmel. David was not there and I guessed that he had left for Mishmar Ha'emek. Several of those at the table I had met before, some not. The fighting at Mishmar Ha'emek dominated the conversation. The Arabs had no hope of overrunning the settlement, someone said with confidence, but agreed that the attack was very worrisome. It showed first, that the ALA was able to mount a serious attack in territory assigned to the Jews under the Partition Plan, and second, that the British were no longer able, or willing, to intervene in any effective way. To arrange a truce to evacuate children was helpful, someone else said, but it was not exactly hurling back the aggressor. With this I had to agree. But why, I asked, were they so confident that the settlement wouldn't fall? Palmach units had moved through the hills, I was told, and were already attacking el-Kawukji's forces from the rear. "You will read about it in the papers tomorrow."

Valentina's friends all seemed, as I would have anticipated by now, to belong to the left of the political spectrum. As if to assure me of this or perhaps to reassure themselves, one of them declared in measured tones that the Palestinian Arabs are no threat to the Jews and both could live together in peace: the trouble comes from the ultra-nationalists like the Mufti. With that the conversation turned to other topics.

Jenin

My conversation with Valentina's friends on 10 April had left me convinced that the initiative at Mishmar Ha'emek had passed to the Jews. Reports in the Palestine Post the next day seemed to confirm that this was so. I was sufficiently assured that the fighting was at an end that I felt it safe to travel, two days later, to Jenin. This was no mere whim, though I had indeed never visited Jenin. My diary reads:

I was persuaded by friends from Balad esh-Sheikh, who had business there, to take them in a lorry – since they felt that only in our transport would they be safe from attack: an odd commentary on the situation.

The entry was obviously cautiously worded, and the reference to "friends from Balad esh-Sheikh" was quite misleading. By this time our labour force had been reduced to fifty men or so, enough to be able to maintain the diminished level of production. Few of them cared any longer to travel to work such were the risks of terrorist attacks on public transport. The majority of our labourers thus now came from Balad esh-Sheikh, and not a few of them had family connections in Jenin. Their spokesmen approached the mukhtar to request me ("officially") for help. Fearing for their future when the Mandate ended, they wanted to contact relatives in Jenin and give them money for safekeeping. The mukhtar delegated six of the platoon's labourers to carry out this task, and undertook to seek my help as officer responsible for labour affairs. I decided that the use of the Platoon's 3-tonner could be justified for this purpose and would help maintain the goodwill of the fifty or so men whose labour we still needed.

Early in the morning of 13 April I left Nesher Camp with a platoon driver and the six men chosen by the mukhtar. I was not to know that Fawzi el-Kawukji was launching a renewed attack on Mishmar Ha'emek. The story is best told through the diary entries for 14 April.

The triangle of mountains bounded by Nablus, Tulkarm and Jenin, was the area which the Arabs held so magnificently against the British Army and Air Force from 1936 to 1939. Yesterday I was able to enter this area, and, more remarkably, to leave it again ... The area has again been organized as an Arab base, and it will of course be part of the Arab state under the Partition Plan. It was from here that Fawzi el-Kawukji directed the attack on Mishmar Ha'emek, but I learn that he left in haste for Jerusalem two or three days ago. All the Arabs here utter his name with the utmost reverence.

We reached Jamala and learned that renewed fighting had made the road quite impassable. We therefore took the Nazareth road, and branched off through Ginnigar to Afula. The diary resumes,

The road between Afula and Jenin leads one out of Jewish occupied Esdraelon into purely Arab territory. Just outside Jewish Afula the road runs along an embankment over the marshy plains, and the Jews have blown up a complete section of the road. A deserted lorry, its cargo of bananas and vegetables now rotten, lies overturned beside the embankment. I can see now why my passengers regarded British transport as the only way of getting through. It seems crazy to have attempted it – but I didn't know what it was like out here. Further on beyond the marshes one comes to the first line of Arab defences, a frontier post manned by Kawukji's forces, Palestinians in this case, who wear orange coloured head-dresses. There are road blocks, machine gun posts, slit trenches and a small encampment. For the next mile or so one passes through a series of similar defences, each one reinforcing the one before it. Beyond these lies a large barracks, at Jalama, the main base for the forward troops. At each post we were stopped, the lorry searched, and identity cards inspected.

Some way beyond Jalama we arrived in Jenin, a rather splendid town of very strong oriental appearance, dominated by a graceful minaret. The town is full of troops, Syrians, Iraqis, and British deserters, all of whom wear a wine coloured head-dress in contrast to the orange of the Palestinians. There were well organized vehicle parks, petrol points, offices, and so forth. From Jenin we could still hear the sound of the bombardment of Mishmar Ha'emek, some 20

kilometres away, and we watched reinforcements in three-ton lorries, jeeps, and on motor cycles despatched to the battle front. There was a small Palestine Police Post, still manned, in the town. But the Police had left their huge barracks, which had been taken over by the Arab Army, and were established instead, in a small ex-Army camp. They had become non-operational except with regard to deserters. The civilians in the town appeared to get rather harsh treatment from the soldiers – indeed, the whole town was clearly dominated by the Arab Army.

We had been driving about the town quite freely, and I had imposed a time limit of ten minutes for each of my passengers to transact his business. A jeep pulled alongside us, and four Arab soldiers climbed out. One, an officer I assumed, spoke excellent English and most politely informed me that the use of our lorry was required. It was needed to pull some Iraqi soldiers back from Mishmar Ha`emek. He regretted the inconvenience, but said that tea would be provided at the barracks for the driver and me and that he would have the lorry back in no more than an hour. I asked him why he did not use one of his own vehicles, for there seemed to be many standing around. “We have a petrol problem,” he said. The situation was such that it seemed useless to protest further, but I confess to being highly relieved when the lorry was not only returned, but returned somewhat within the hour.

“Having thus contributed our modest share to the battle of Mishmar Ha`emek,” I wrote, “no one seemed to have any objections to our leaving, and we departed along the same road we had come in on.” I set down a few observations about the uneventful journey:

Returning, I was struck by the comparative poorness of the Jewish defences at Afula. The roadblock there – the only one – was manned by two Jews. They joked with our labourers in Arabic, and did not search them; indeed, did not even require them to get down from the lorry. Passing through the succession of Jewish settlements after Afula, we were not halted. I think the point is that the Jews are depending less on the maintenance of fixed points than on the highly mobile Palmach units – which is how Haganah was originally developed by General Orde Wingate. Ginnigar is an extremely beautiful settlement with a watchtower like a swan’s neck, gleaming through the trees on the hillside above. We saw there a column of Haganah infantry probably en route for Mishmar Ha`emek... All in all, an odd sort of day.

The last entry in my diary that has reference to Mishmar Ha`emek is dated two days later, 16 April. I met Radin in Miriam’s café for morning coffee. He was accompanied by two men who had just returned from Mishmar Ha`emek where one who resided in Nesher held some sort of command (at what level I did not like to inquire). The three talked very openly about how they viewed the current situation, and in my tent after lunch I recorded the main lines of the conversation:

Yesterday Haganah moved into an offensive to relieve Mishmar Ha`emek. The Arab Army has apparently been driven back on Jenin. It does not seem that Haganah intends to attack Jenin itself. In Nesher they [Radin and associates] say that Jenin is not a strategic point even though a base for Arab troops. I questioned them about this. It is clear that they are basically concerned with holding towns like Haifa as the British withdraw. They are prepared to allow that they cannot defend all rural areas as such, and say that each settlement must organize its own defence although, as in the case of Mishmar Ha`emek, they will attempt to give assistance to a settlement being overwhelmed. But they feel that if they can hold the towns, and particularly Haifa port, then after the end of the Mandate they can get through the supplies they need. Thus even if they lose control in some rural areas, they will be able to reassert this later. But Haganah is still extremely worried about small-arms and ammunition – their main source now is captured material. They say that they captured a number of 75mm guns in the relief of Mishmar Ha`emek. They also say that they had to strike a balance between attempting a major attack on the Arab Army and expending too much ammunition, or simply forcing it back without inflicting a decisive defeat. I believe this. A Nesher commander [in Mishmar Ha`emek] says that he doubts whether more than 100 to 200 were killed in the

fighting. He does not know what the Jewish casualties were ... and would not give his own.

Ramat Yohanan and Deir Yassin

Throughout the tempestuous days when attention was focused on Fawzi el-Kawukji's attack on Mishmar Ha'emek, the simultaneous movement by the Druze of the Arab Liberation Army against Ramat Yohanan passed almost unnoticed. It, too, failed, but not before the Druze had suffered very heavy casualties. I was told later that the Druze felt they had been sacrificed by Fawzi el-Kawukji. He had sent them to Ramat Yohanan, which lay less than ten miles east of Haifa, not because he thought they could take the settlement but because he wanted to divert some of the Haganah troops from Mishmar Ha'emek. Thereafter many Druze were said to have changed their allegiance to fight on the Jewish side, but I only had this as rumour.

The attack on Deir Yassin, a village near Jerusalem, received far more attention. It was carried out by the IZL and Stern Group on 9 April, and resulted in an appalling massacre of Arab men, women and children. We first learned of it through the pages of the Palestine Post. The Jewish Agency and Haganah condemned the action in the strongest possible terms. The Chief Rabbinate called on those responsible "to realize the depths of the shame which they have inflicted on the Yishuv to whom such acts are utter abominations." I was in little doubt that the massacre ended the developing rapprochement between Haganah and IZL.

The Arab Legion

On the evening of 16 April I had a drink with David in Haifa. He had, he said, been granted "leave" to go to Mishmar Ha'emek. He was pleased to say that his wife and family were safe and that all danger had passed. "You have been more fortunate than your opposite numbers at Deir Yassin," I remarked. It was an unkind observation and an unnecessary one. David was somewhat taken aback. Deir Yassin was a terrible thing, he said, and I will tell you that there are Haganah people in Haifa who are so angry that they talk of supplying the British security forces with the names and addresses of members of the IZL and Stern Group known to them. "Would you do that?" I asked. "Of course not," he said, "and nor will anyone else." After that infelicitous start to our consultation I rapidly changed the subject. I mentioned my visit to Jenin.

David was very interested. "So according to what you heard, Fawzi el-Kawukji would have gone to Jerusalem a week or so ago," he said. I agreed, wondering whether this was important. David explained. They (and I assumed he meant Haganah Intelligence) had heard that el-Kawukji had just held a meeting with Abdul Qadir Pasha al-Jundi to discuss joint operations. "Who is Abdul Qadir Pasha al-Jundi?" I asked. "He is your man's second-in-command," he said. "My man?" I asked. This time the "he" turned out to be no less than my countryman John Glubb Pasha, commander of the Arab Legion. I knew very little about him, but I could see cause for David's alarm at the possibility that an agreement was being made in Jerusalem between representatives of the Arab Liberation Army and the Arab Legion.

I knew at this point that David would return to the matter of presence of the 8th Garrison Company of the Arab Legion in Nesher Camp, and once again I had to tell him that I knew very little about it since it was not under the Platoon's command. That was true but only just so for only two or three days later Webster told me that he had been asked to send one of his officers, but one who had a camera, to dinner at the 8th Garrison Company mess. I knew immediately that Webster had been invited, and that, since it was a common belief at the time that the choice items in Arab cuisine were the eyeballs of sheep, he was trying to escape the obligation. "Would I like to go?" he asked? I decided not to be cooperative. "Not really," I said. "Consider it an order, then," he snapped.

The officer in command of the Garrison Company, a captain, met me. His unit was, he told me immediately, pulling out of Nesher Camp within the next few days, and he wanted to say goodbye to his friends. I said, "How nice," or something to that effect, though I had not

so much as spoken to him before. I asked where his company was going next. He said that he didn't yet know, though I felt sure that he did.

The evening commenced with photographs. I was relieved of my camera and much to my embarrassment, swiftly enveloped in a voluminous blue gown which fitted comfortably over my uniform. An appropriate headdress was patiently arranged on my head: patiently, because the band was rather small for my head and kept falling off. The captain and a sergeant posed behind me, and a young soldier who was obviously chosen for his skills as a photographer said what I imagined was the Arabic equivalent of "Cheese please." The occasion was thus recorded for posterity, and I was made to promise to send prints to the captain.

We proceeded to dinner. The meal was a memorable one, though I neither knew nor cared to know what I was eating. Conversation flowed easily enough in both English and Arabic, the captain translating for my benefit. Care was obviously taken to steer clear of politics. I was called upon to say a few words but I have no recollection of whatever platitudes I fell back on. Toasts were made to King George V of England, King Abdullah of Transjordan, and Glubb Pasha; we drank them in something that resembled wine but presumably was not. I forgot my camera, but it was delivered to 376 Petrol Platoon before dawn the next morning. I was unable to fulfil my promise to send the captain prints since he had given me no forwarding address (and was probably ensconced in Jerusalem by the time the film was developed).

I did not convey the news of the Legion's departure from Nesher Camp to David. I felt that to do so would be to betray the hospitality I had been shown. I guessed in any case that Haganah Intelligence knew of the matter before I did.

376 Petrol Platoon

Sometime early in April Headquarters, North Palestine District, issued a general instruction that every unit would be required to calculate the weight of the equipment for which shipping would be required. This was to include tents and bedding, filing cabinets, office tables and desks, refrigerators, stoves and other kitchen objects down to dishes, plates, knives, forks and spoons. Use should be made of weighbridges if necessary. We were dumbfounded! The nearest weighbridge to Nesher Camp was in Haifa Port. Were we to load our 3-tonner and make several dummy runs? It was this, I think, and the fact that the end of the Mandate was only a month away, that led us to carry out a mid-April review of the state of the Platoon.

The Nesher Transshipment Sidings had been closed down in March but we had not made the effort required of us to remove all jerricans to Nesher II Installation. There seemed no point in doing so, and the sheer number of cans made the task a forbidding one. The Sidings, then, still contained many stacks of cans, perhaps fifteen or so at a guess. The base of a stack was usually 12 cans wide and 24 long, the cans being laid flat on the ground. Each successive level was corbelled by half a can, so that the top level – perhaps 10 layers high – measured about 4 cans by 24. I made no diary entries about such mundane matters, but I would estimate that a typical stack, looking like a truncated pyramid from either end, contained upwards of 1,500 cans.

The personnel of the Platoon were distributed between five occupational categories. When at full strength these were clerks (2 sergeants, 1 corporal, 4 privates); storemen (6 sergeants, 3 corporals); petrol fitters (3 corporals); drivers (1 corporal, 1 lance-corporal, 16 privates); and issuers (4 lance-corporals, 18 privates). The last, who physically dispensed the petrol, worked closely with the Arab labourers, who manhandled the empty jerricans to, and the full ones from, the filling points.

With the closure of the Transshipment Sidings, the Platoon's strength began to fall. As soldiers became due for demobilization, they were not replaced. I doubt whether we were much over half-strength by the middle of April. We were, however, also dispensing less petrol as the evacuation of troops gathered momentum, and McClenahan and I found ourselves with much spare time on our hands. We took to motorcycling. The Platoon had four rather unimpressive motorbikes that had probably seen their best days during the war. We had several of the drivers check over and service a couple of them, and then show us how

to ride them. In no time at all we were at least competent if not skilled. We became quite attached to these rather austere and basic machines, and after dinner the two of us would have much sport cavorting around the deserted Transshipment Sidings, weaving our ways between the stacks of jerricans and taking many a fall in the loose sand along the perimeter fence. We simply gave up dipping the tanks in Wadi el-Tabal at nights. No one seemed to care since the dipping had no effect on the tapping of the line in Balad esh-Sheikh.

Afif Dib Assad

The labourers on the installations were paid weekly. For some reason unknown to me, this was done early on Tuesday evenings. It was an important ritual. The Platoon's pay clerk, a corporal, was seated at a table with the payroll spread out before him. Beside him was a lance-corporal whose task was to secure the thumb print of each labourer paid, thus signalling the latter's agreement that the amount he had received was correct. Behind the table stood a sergeant, whose role was obvious from the rifle he carried. McClenahan or I would be present, wandering round and just keeping a general eye on things. Usually all went quite smoothly. On Tuesday, 20 April, they did not. My diary for that day reports a most tragic occurrence:

At pay time Afif Dib Assad, our timekeeper and Mohammed's brother, was stabbed through the throat and died instantly. I was only a few yards away. I think the labourer who killed him was Syrian. As he ran away I didn't know whether to shoot him or not. I didn't, and he got away. It was odd. To shoot him would be to judge him at the same time, instantaneous judgement and sentence as it were. And I know that Afif has been extorting money from all the labourers – on threat of getting them discharged. But Afif was like so many rogues, a pleasant one. He had given me a rather nice dagger only a few days ago, and now he has died by one.

The labourers did not give chase to the assassin, but crowded silently around the body. Mohammed asked me to allow him the use of the Platoon's lorry to take the corpse to Balad esh-Sheikh. I instructed a driver accordingly. A few men remained to be paid, and I told the pay clerk to carry on.

Webster arrived and asked for a full account of what had happened. Why had I not shot the murderer? I said I didn't know. What was the name of the labourer who had killed Afif? I said I didn't know. I had never seen Webster so angry. Why had I allowed Mohammed to take the corpse away? I said that it seemed the decent thing to do. Why had I allowed the platoon's 3-tonner to be used for this purpose? I said that it was rather difficult to get a corpse into the Jeep. The unquestionable truth of this observation seemed to make Webster angrier. My procedures were all wrong. The Palestine Police had to be notified immediately. Just what sort of an officer did I think I was?

Webster sent his driver to Balad esh-Sheikh, to find Mohammed and bring him back to camp immediately. I went to my tent and penned the above somewhat laconic diary entry at about 7 p.m. I was much shaken. Dinner was a subdued affair, with Webster pointedly ignoring me. The inquiry opened in the Platoon office at about 9 p.m. Mohammed was able to cast considerable light on the affair. The assassin, he said, was definitely not one of our labourers. He had been sent from outside. For years the Husseinis had been trying to win the allegiance of the Arab workers. They took over the Arab Worker's Society at a time when it was led by Sami Taha. This led the communist workers to form the Arab Workers' Congress. But Sami Taha would not desert his own union. He stayed with it. Then the Husseinis said, "Sami Taha is one of us now." But he was not. He still resisted them, so they had him assassinated and made one of their own men boss of the Arab Worker's Society. This was about six months ago.

"I don't want to know about all that," said Webster. "Tell me about your brother?" Mohammad dealt with this interruption by ignoring it. Many of the rank and file of the Arab Worker's Society, he continued, remain loyal to Sami Taha. They believe that Arab and Jewish workers all want the same things, like better pay and better medical treatment. They

don't want to fight the Jews. "Mohammed," said Webster, "stop wasting our time." I thought this unreasonable on Webster's part. Mohammed clearly thought it obtuse. "I am telling you about my brother, sir," he replied. "My brother would never do what the Husseinis wanted, and many of the labourers supported him. So today someone was sent to kill him."

We thanked Mohammed conveyed our condolences, and retired to the bar. It was about midnight, but Webster insisted on drafting our report before turning in. He was obviously very worried in case his anticipated repatriation might be delayed but his anger had abated. He delegated the drafting of the report to me ("for my sins"). He would not, he told me, draw attention to my sorry role in the affair. As he rather inappropriately put it, I had "saved his bacon" by recovering the rifles from Balad esh-Sheikh in February, and now he would save mine. I did not see eye-to-eye with him on this one. Losing rifles to raiders seemed to me one thing, surrendering a corpse to relatives quite another. However that may be, we agreed on a report that went off to Palestine Police HQ within a few hours. Before we retired to our tents, however, we had one last drink – to Afif's memory. Charitably, we agreed that despite his many faults he was really an extremely likeable and engaging person. Death was already worked wonders to his image.

We heard nothing more of the matter from the Police. The Criminal Investigation Department was, I am sure, much too busy at that point in time to deal with the assassination of the unfortunate Afif Dib Assad.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LATER APRIL 1948

317 Field Security Section

We had only a few hours sleep before breakfast on 21 April, and had only just finished eating when a captain from 317 Field Security Section, with three sergeants of the Intelligence Corps, arrived at the platoon office. My first thought was that their presence had something to do with the assassination. But how, I wondered, could they have come to know of it so soon? Or had they, perhaps, learned of our hobnobbing with Haganah? I was greatly relieved when the purpose of their visit was explained. Field Security had reason to believe that Haganah was under pressure from the IZL to take over certain vital installations before, or immediately on, the end of the Mandate. 376 Petrol Platoon was one of these. Our defences should therefore be looked into. We could obviously not tell our visitors that there was nothing to worry about, Haganah having more or less promised us its protection. Instead, we assured them that we were ready to defend Nesher Camp to the last Basuto – or something to that effect. I spent most of the morning guiding them around the installations and the perimeter. They did not seem very interested in anything they saw. One of the sergeants tried to engage me in conversation about Jewish history but my ignorance of the subject proved a severe handicap. He renewed his attempt to be friendly by asking me if I liked Wittgenstein. I had never heard of him at that time but made a guess. My comment that he was one of my favourite musicians reduced that sergeant to silence. Neither the captain nor the other sergeant cared to take up the challenge. We negotiated a further few hundred yards of the perimeter when, much to my relief, the inspection ended quite abruptly. Lunchtime was approaching and routine seemingly dictated that the visitors should appear punctually at their own mess for that mid-day ritual. “You’ll be hearing from us,” the captain said; “but you seem to be in rather good shape. Just call the 3rd Hussars if you have problems.” I took this to mean that we would not hear anything further from our Field Security Section visitors, and to the best of my knowledge we never did. Their departure was rather felicitous, however, for shortly after they left Nesher Camp I received a telephone call from David. I was surprised, for he had never contacted me at the camp before. Could I come to his flat this afternoon? There was someone who wanted to meet me.

Dan Laner

I asked Webster if I might use his Jeep and, in his usual way, he agreed providing I told him nothing about why I wanted it. There was a driver whom I had come to regard as in some sense mine. I had him take me into Haifa. As we set off I wondered just what account of my journey I should give this time to the Guards who now manned the checkpoint at Wadi Rushmiyya. Use the well-tested formula, I supposed: “On my way to C.RASC, Sergeant.” We rounded the bend in the road that brought the bridge into sight, and heard machine gun fire. We stopped. Two Arabs with rifles approached and looked into the Jeep. They waved towards the houses above the road and said, “Go!” The firing stopped and we crossed. The Guards checkpoint was there, but unmanned. We drove through it. There were several Jewish armoured cars in Herzl Street. No one paid any attention to us. We would probably have felt less ill at ease if they had. “What the hell’s going on, sir?” my driver asked. “Haven’t a clue,” I said. I settled him in a small bar where we were both known, and walked the short distance to David’s flat. He lived on the fourth floor and Valentina on the second of the same building. I tapped on her door in passing, to say hello, but she was not in.

David appeared at his door in what I took to be uniform, a military looking shirt, tightly-belted trousers, and boots. He introduced me to a somewhat older and taller man who, he said proudly, had led the battalion that relieved Mishmar Ha’emek. “But I have to leave you,” David added, “so I’ll let you introduce yourselves.” We shook hands. “My name is Dan,” he said, “Dan Laner.” He asked, somewhat abruptly it seemed to me, if I had any trouble crossing the Wadi Rushmiyya bridge. I described the situation to him, expressing my surprise at finding no Guards on duty there. It was Laner’s turn to be surprised. “You don’t know?”

he said. "Know what?" I asked. He told me that just before daylight that morning all British troops were withdrawn from positions in the main Arab and Jewish quarters of Haifa. It was, he said, quite official. The Army had informed both Arab and Jewish authorities in the town of its decision two or three days ago. Laner was quite amazed when I assured him that no one at 376 Petrol Platoon knew anything about the change in tactics.

Laner was quite disconcerted by what I had told him. He was angry that David had not made sure that I knew the current situation when he phoned to arrange our meeting. I pointed out that it had probably not occurred to David that the information was contained in some weekly North Palestine report that had not yet been despatched. That may be so, Laner said, and gave an account of events as he saw them. As the Guards withdrew from their positions in Wadi Rushmiyya so a Haganah unit was moved in to take control of the bridge and prevent the Arabs from blowing it up. It succeeded in crossing the bridge and a large house on the Arab side was occupied. The Haganah men, however, found themselves pinned down in the building and not really in effective control of the bridge. "Don't know how on earth you got over it this morning," Laner remarked.

I guessed that Laner was thirty or so, but he had the air of authority of an older man. He opened a bottle of David's wine and began to chat. He spoke about the fighting at Mishmar Ha'emek and Ramat Yohanan, and paid high tribute to the Druze. "Fanatical fighters, the bravest I have ever met," he said. "They came in nine waves, with knives in their mouths, and each was mown down attacking our machine gun posts." Many of Fawzi el-Kawukji's casualties, he thought, must have been Druze. I realized from the way he talked that he had played an important part in ending the Arab offensive. I decided to be bold and ask him his rank in Haganah. I was not a little discomfited when he told me that he commanded the Palmach battalion that had forced el-Kawukji's retreat. At this point I was quite out of my depth. I asked him if he was moving his battalion into Haifa. No, he said, Palmach could not risk being trapped in a town. It had to be completely flexible so that it could respond rapidly to any Arab initiative. So what was Laner doing in Hadar Hacarmel talking to me, I wondered? He sensed my perplexity. "Let me explain," he said. I noted that the scenario for the defence of Haifa that Laner went on to offer was much the same as that previously outlined by David. I assumed that both were drawing upon what they knew of the current thinking of the Haganah General Staff.

Laner spoke slowly. I have no doubt, he said, that several of the Arab states will invade Palestine as soon as the Mandate ends. I believe that a major drive will be made to take Haifa Port. A supply of vehicle fuel will be critical to our defence. We need to secure the refineries and all storage tanks, and we need take over the military installations that handle distribution. "Like 376 Petrol Platoon," I said. "Exactly," he replied. I told Laner what I had told David; that in my opinion Webster would leave the installations in as undamaged a condition as he could. "Well, yes," Laner said, "but a new problem has arisen." He went on to tell me what I already knew from our own reports, that IZL was pressing for the immediate occupation of certain British installations that were vital to the defence of Haifa. This would be folly, Laner pointed out, since Haganah remained desperately short of arms and any confrontation with the security forces could only worsen the situation. "And on that note," he said, just when I thought it time to leave, "we should get down to business."

Laner said that he understood that British units awaiting evacuation were required to submit the laden weight of their vehicles and that in order to do that many would have to use the weighing platform in Haifa Port. I congratulated him on his information but pointed out that we had already disposed of our surplus weaponry and that I could not conceive that anything we were weighing in for shipment would be of the slightest use to Haganah. He was in total agreement. All I am asking you to do, Laner said, is load up your platoon lorry but not too heavily, and bring it to the Port. The marines will check you through, recording the purpose of your visit and your vehicle's identification. All you will need to do then is to proceed to the platform and weigh in. We have a Haganah Port Unit that will help you on your way out. I did not know whether the pun was intended or not but I was irritated. I thought that Laner was presuming on the goodwill I had expressed for the Jews and that I supposed had been reported to him by David. I told Laner that I would need a much clearer

picture of what was going on if he wanted my cooperation. The silence extended for several minutes, or so it seemed, before Laner spoke. "I apologise," he said; "here is the position."

Some months ago, according to Laner, the Jewish Agency made a purchase of arms from a Czechoslovakian manufacturer. Payment was made and the arms were consigned to Haifa, the port having been declared open in accordance with a United Nations recommendation. The Navy made no attempt to intercept the boat (as they did those carrying Jewish immigrants). The crates were duly landed on the Haifa dockside. At that stage nothing illegal had occurred. In violation of the UN agreement, however, the security forces would not allow the consignees, the Jewish Agency, to collect the shipment from the docks. The Paratroopers and now the Marines keep Haifa Port tightly sealed and many crates with Jewish destinations are simply piled up supposedly awaiting examination by Customs. I would, Laner pointed out, see the seriousness of this situation when he tells me that the arms in question are submachine guns of recent manufacture that were purchased specifically for Palmach. We are asking you to allow the Haganah Port Unit to load some of these weapons on to your platoon's lorry after it has been weighed.

It was my turn to be silent for a time. I did not want to see Jews slaughtering Arabs nor Arabs slaughtering Jews. I still thought that the decision to partition Palestine was a disastrous one, but recognised that the Jews had to have the means to defend themselves at the end of the Mandate. The war record of prominent Arab leaders came to mind. I thought of the time, less than seven years ago, when the German Panzers seemed poised to drive into Middle East, when the Mufti of Jerusalem was an advisor to Hitler, when plans were being made to extend the Final Solution to the Jews of Palestine, and when Palmach was being hastily put together to spearhead Jewish resistance

"Yes," I said to Laner, "I will do what you ask."

376 Petrol Platoon

By the time Laner and I had finished talking it was late afternoon and I needed to get back to Nesher Camp before the labourers arrived to work the evening shift. I had hoped to see Valentina but had left it too late. Laner sent someone to find my driver and have him bring the Jeep to the apartment, and urged me to avoid Wadi Rushmiyya by taking the mountain road back to Nesher. By tomorrow, Laner said, Haganah would have secured the bridge, but he did not know what the situation was at present. I assumed that no Palmach unit was involved in the fighting there.

Webster and McClenahan were my only companions at dinner. I had already decided I would tell neither of them about the service I had agreed to do for Laner. The former, I knew, would have been particularly uncomfortable with the information such was his anxiety to avoid trouble until he had his embarkation orders. Otherwise I felt able to give an account of my meeting and to relay Laner's view about the likely importance of the Platoon to the Jewish defence of Haifa. I retired early. I needed time to think everything over, in the quietness of my tent. I opened my diary with a brief summary of the situation as I saw it:

The atmosphere is now very tense. Communications have broken down almost everywhere; one stretch of road controlled by Arabs, the next by Jews. There is almost continuous gunfire from one quarter or another. I do not understand what British HQ in Haifa is now doing. The Airborne Division, utterly demoralized, has been withdrawn from operational duty in Haifa, and the Guards put in.

I also commented on the strength of the perimeter defences now manned by 40th Commando Royal Marine under command of the Guards, and on their readiness to intervene in any fighting thought to threaten the Port. I did not, of course, record in any detail my conversation with Laner whom I identified as "battalion commander of the troops that relieved Mishmar Ha'emek," and whom I described him as "a young man, pleasant, imperturbable," and as having "considerable presence."

I thought, with some trepidation, about the arrangement with Laner. I wondered what factors had influenced my decision. I was not at all sure that socialism as I understood it was

easily compatible with Zionism in the form it was currently taking, but I was totally repelled by hatred of Jews regenerated by the more extreme Arab nationalists. I was appalled by the political immorality of Attlee's Labour government and by the unbelievable hypocrisy of its spokesmen. Then there were personal factors, most of all my feelings for Valentina. Since the magical days of the malaria course the rising tide of violence had made it increasingly difficult to meet. My feelings for her remained unaltered as I assumed did hers for me. I determined to see her the next day, and dozed off.

I was awakened in the early hours of the morning of 22 April. Very heavy fighting was obviously taking place in Haifa. The explosions of grenades and mortars punctuated the almost ceaseless rattle of small arms and machine guns. There had been no change in the situation when we sat down to breakfast, but seldom was anything allowed to disrupt that ritual. We found that our telephones were not working, and noticed that there was nothing on the local radio but music. Few labourers turned up for work. "We'll have to find out what's going on," said Webster; "what a pity I can't leave my office..."

I took the Jeep into town. The driver was relieved when I said we would head for the docks and not, as usual, Hadar Hacarmel. We could hear bursts of fire from several parts of the town, but the Port was quiet in the sense that there was no shooting. Otherwise the scene was one of the utmost chaos. In uncontrollable numbers Arab men, women and children had swept through the gates to the port, regardless of the Marine Commandos who were there to prevent such things happening. The refugees felt confident, I assumed that no Jewish fire would be directed into the Port. Some of them were, as I noted in the diary, "sailing away in any sort of craft, be it steamer for Egypt or rowing boat for Acre." But those were the wealthier ones. The majority just sat helplessly around the few small bundles of possessions they had with them. It seemed obvious that whatever fighting was still going on, the Jews had succeeded in taking control of Haifa. It occurred to me that such a battle was no part of the scenario that both David and Laner had given me for the future of Haifa. I had assumed that both were drawing on what they knew of the thinking of the Haganah General Staff. Now it seemed that this was not so. Perhaps the Jewish defeat of Fawzi el-Kawukji's forces at Mishmar Ha'emek had greatly affected Haganah strategy.

Bursts of fire could still be heard from the town, so I decided not even to try to go to Hadar Hacarmel. To my utter surprise, however, I found the left-wing bookshop near the Port was not only still there but was actually open. "Business as usual," said a man sitting at the door, and there, quite unbelievably, was Tewfik. I had not seen him for weeks. He was as assured as ever. I had no need to say anything. "You wish to know, of course, why the Arabs are in flight," he said. I concurred. "You must understand that for Muslims flight from the land of the enemy is a religious duty, which is why the Prophet Mohammed fled from Mecca to Medina." I was rather taken aback by this (to me) novel explanation of the Arab predicament in Haifa. Rather feebly, I said something about it being hard that Haifa Arabs should lose their homes and almost all they owned. "You miss the point," Tewfik replied. "They will become organized in exile, and sweep back into the town when the Mandate ends. It will be a holy war, a jihad." "Why, then," I asked, "are you in the bookshop and not at the beach?" I think it was exactly the question he had been angling for. "I am a Christian and a Communist," he proclaimed; "so I have no obligation to flee." (One is reminded of the Irishman in court who, when asked to swear on the Bible, declared that he was an atheist. "That is irrelevant," said the judge; "are you a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist?) I asked Tewfik about his position when the Arabs did sweep back into Haifa. "I don't need to answer that," he said; "they never will." He was, as we now know, correct. At the time I thought he was posturing. "Give my greetings to your young lady," he said. As I left I could see the faithful in the Port, lining up to make a morning prayer.

Nazareth

When I arrived back in Nesher Camp mid-morning on 22 April I found a delegation of labourers awaiting me. I cite the diary.

They said they were anxious to evacuate women and children to Nazareth until the fighting was over. They wanted us to place our transport at their disposal. They were dignified, but insistent – pointing out that by employing them we had assumed responsibility for their families and that we now had to discharge those obligations.

Webster, McClenahan and I gave careful consideration to their argument. “Did I think that Balad esh-Sheikh was in danger of attack,” Webster asked? I pointed out that Haganah had established a unit at the Wadi Rushmiyya bridge immediately the Guards withdrew. It had been, I said, a very risky operation, indicating that priority was being given to keeping the roads open. It therefore seemed to me likely that Haganah would attempt to destroy the Liberation Army strongpoint on the edge of Balad esh-Sheikh but, since it was known that the Petrol Platoon’s work force was drawn mainly from the town, it would not extend its attack more widely. Webster found my reasoning unconvincing, and decided that we should meet as best we could the labourers’ request. The organization fell on me since I remained in charge of the platoon’s labour relations. I informed the delegates that Mohammed (now senior timekeeper) and the ghaffurs would be responsible for bringing the women and children to the Platoon in an orderly fashion, and that the mukhtar would be in charge in the town and Mr. McClenahan in Nesher Camp. I myself would see that nothing untoward happened in Nazareth. I travelled in the Jeep on the first run, taking with me three labourers who spoke good English to serve as interpreters. They would return with me to Nesher Camp on the last shuttle of the day.

The journey was quite uneventful. “Nazareth,” I wrote, “looked very beautiful, but was crowded with refugees. Most of our labourers seemed to have relatives there, and the evacuees were rapidly distributed among their houses.” Nevertheless I do not think that we succeeded in completing more than two round trips in the course of the afternoon. I kept no count of the number of women and children we moved. My guess is that it was around a hundred. We intended to keep up the good work the next day, but we were overtaken by events.

The Arab Legion

It was early evening when I (and my three pro tem interpreters) left Nazareth in the Jeep, reckoning on reaching Nesher Camp for dinner. We had passed Yagur and were no more than a couple of miles from Nesher Camp when we heard the sound of heavy machine gun fire and saw burning vehicles on the road ahead. I told the driver to approach the scene very slowly, and the shooting stopped. There were armoured cars, lorries, jeeps and petrol tankers strewn across the road and to either side of it. “The carnage was horrifying,” I wrote that night;

I had seen nothing like it since the great Coventry blitz. There were men staggering around with their intestines hanging out, others with parts of their faces blown off. No one seemed in charge, and we tried to restore some sort of order. Our arrival served to check the attack, though the three labourers who had accompanied me to Nazareth looked understandably ill at ease.

The convoy was an Arab Legion one. It had obviously been proceeding southwards, and had been attacked from the hillside on this Jewish controlled stretch of road. I was unable to see just where the Jewish positions were. A number of uninjured soldiers appeared from the wreckage. Since no one seemed to be in command, I had them carry the wounded to the three or four lorries still in working order. The three platoon labourers with me assisted, but reluctantly. I was reasonably confident that the Jews would hold their fire at least until we had left the scene. My grounds for thinking this had nothing to do with the threat we presented to them: one subaltern with a pistol, one driver with a rifle, and three unarmed labourers. It had, rather, to do with the fact that at this time (so I believed) the Jews were trying to avoid any confrontation with the British.

A car arrived from the direction of Haifa. I did not recognize the driver, but he seemed to know me. He said that he was from Nesher, and that Yagur had phoned them to bring medical supplies – bandages, splints and so forth – for Jews who had been wounded at the scene of the ambush but had been evacuated to the settlement. I asked him why an Arab Legion Convoy was being attacked when it was on its way to Transjordan. He said he did not think that it was going there at all, but was taking fuel and arms to the Arab Liberation Army in Jenin. This was what Haganah Intelligence had reported. Whatever the case, I let him through.

I have mentioned earlier David Schvit of Nesher, who I met in 1989 and who had watched my dipping the tanks above Balad esh-Sheikh in 1948. In fact I learned that he was the very driver who had arrived at the ambush. “I came,” he remembered,

in a black taxi to take the wounded out. The regular driver had been killed, so I drove it... I was told that I must save them [the Jewish wounded]. There had been some “fun” there. That taxi was like a tank, they were telling me. The glass of the windscreen was very thick. So I said I’d go... I arrived there after the fighting was over. I remember seeing gun carriers with 2-pounders on them – I had been a gunnery officer so I knew about such things. When I got there, there was an English officer with the Arab Legion. He stopped me and asked what I was doing there. I told him that I had come to give first aid. I had this big box on the back seat. He said, “O.K. Go and do what you have to do.

The Haganah decision to ambush the convoy, Schvit recalled, resulted from the fact that only a few days before King Abdullah had informed the Arab League that he would throw the Arab Legion into the forthcoming invasion of Palestine.

Returning to 1948, after the Jewish driver had left on his mission of mercy, I instructed the Arab Legion drivers to take as many of the wounded who could be moved to Nazareth. I could only hope that the hospital facilities there were able to cope but, in view of the situation in Haifa, there was no feasible alternative. I did not see what else I could do on the spot. I had no choice but to leave the dead and the dying in their pools of blood, and get back to Nesher Camp as quickly as possible to seek help.

I found Webster and McClenahan in the mess. “Good God,” Webster said when he saw me. “Bloody hell,” said McClenahan, which seemed more appropriate. I was indeed bloody. “He’s killed someone,” said Webster. “Or someone has killed him,” said McClenahan. “This isn’t funny, you sods,” I said. “I’ll take your confession down,” said Webster. “I’ll witness it,” said McClenahan. They had, clearly, been drinking whilst I was away. “May I get a word in?” I enquired. Something in my voice countered the hilarity of the occasion. I outlined the situation at Yagur. “Good God,” said Webster again, but this time in a different tone of voice.

Webster telephoned HQ 1st Guards Brigade in Haifa, on the assumption that field ambulances were available. Rather to our surprise the line worked, leaving us in no doubt that Haganah truly was in command of the town. “HQ will phone back,” said Webster. They did. Webster took the call. “Nothing to worry about,” he told us; “everything is under control.” He had learned that the Arab Legion convoy was withdrawing from Haifa, its position there having become untenable. A number of mechanics from the 3rd Hussars were travelling with it. When the convoy ran into the ambush, HQ 3rd Hussars had been radioed for help. A squadron of armoured cars arrived. Heavy fire was laid on the Jewish positions, under cover of which the mechanics were safely evacuated. Webster was told that no further action by us was required.

I was puzzled. To the best of my knowledge any Arab Legion forces in the area were still under command of North Palestine District and relied heavily upon other of the security forces for provisions and services. 376 Petrol Platoon, for example, had supplied fuel. I therefore found nothing untoward in the fact that mechanics from the 3rd Hussars should travel with a convoy withdrawing. I did find it disturbing, however, that once the mechanics had been rescued the Arab soldiers were apparently left to their own devices. The Jews then resumed the attack and only stopped with the arrival of our Jeep. We never did find out whether Webster’s report to the Guards resulted in any further action. We rather thought not.

Valentina

Absolved from the necessity of taking further action with respect to the ambushed convoy, over a late dinner Webster reported more of his conversation with Guards HQ. So far as he could understand it, the Army now held only the northern heights of Mount Carmel, Bat Galim, the Port, and the large industrial area along the Bay of Acre. This was indeed the Haifa Enclave, the strange fragment of empire that would officially come into existence only with the end of the Mandate. "And where does all of this leave us?" I asked Webster. "There's not been a whisper about pulling us out," he said, and went on to explain the situation as far as he could understand it. We must, he thought, accept the fact that in the late stages of the evacuation a static unit such as our Platoon would have to be abandoned. He suspected that we might be ordered to shut down the remaining installations at any time now. We felt that Webster should have been given some idea of the future of the Platoon's officers and men. He was not. My thoughts turned to Valentina.

The worsening situation had prevented my seeing much of Valentina in the month that had passed since I ended my course on malaria. During that idyllic week made possible by the Field Hygiene Section, my attachment to Valentina grew stronger, and so I believed did hers to me. We lived in a present that we knew could not last. I passed on to Valentina what little information I had about the evacuation. We explored different futures. We would keep in touch and when I finally returned to Britain she would come over and perhaps decide to stay. Alternatively, I would complete my army service by opting for general demobilization, and then return to what by then would be Israel. I do not remember whether thoughts of marriage crossed my mind at this time. If they did, I was not so bold as to raise the matter with Valentina. By late April the situation had changed radically. War seemed inevitable, and there was no good reason to think that I would be in Palestine for more than two or three weeks. I thought it imperative to see Valentina. Dinner was over, Webster had retired, and McClenahan was dozing. Late as it was, I decided to go into Haifa. I anticipated that there would be little traffic and set off on one of the Platoon's motorbikes that I had come to regard as "mine", although I had never taken it out of the camp before. I encountered only one roadblock, that at Wadi Rushmiyya. It was manned by Haganah soldiers who were very relaxed and waved me through. I was in uniform, and I suppose they felt sure that no Arab thus disguised would dream of riding so ancient and battered a mount.

I knocked Valentina's door and received no reply. I went up to David's apartment. He was awake but looked very tired. He had been in heavy fighting, he said, and had not slept since our meeting on the previous day. Nevertheless he asked me in for a drink. His unit had first come under fire as it moved down Stanton Street towards the Railway Station. The worst fighting had been in the Wadi Rushmiyya area. Arab Legion troops had not remained neutral, but had gone into action in several parts of the town. I mentioned the ambush of the Legion soldiers near Yagur and he thought that they had most likely been among those who had done so.

I thought it a good time to question David further since he seemed pleased to have someone to talk to. I asked him how it had come about that Haganah had chosen to launch an offensive in Haifa before the end of the Mandate. It had, he said, taken him by surprise. Everything planned had been moved up by several weeks. The decision must have been taken by the Haganah strategists but made known only to the top field commanders. He thought that Moshe Carmel, the head of the Carmeli Brigade of Palmach, had been chosen to direct the offensive. He was now negotiating terms of what people are already calling "the Arab surrender". David said that from what he knew of the politics of Moshe Carmel, every attempt would be made to stem the flight of the Arabs from Haifa. "We need them," he said.

Since it was gone midnight I told David that I would make one final check to see if Valentina had returned. He looked very ill at ease. "I wouldn't do that," he said. "I didn't want to have to tell you this, but she has not been seen for two or three days and I received one report that she had been killed by crossfire in the fighting. I could think of nothing to say. David, troubled by my silence, broke it. "Let's not jump to conclusions," he said, "it's only a rumour." Pessimistic by nature, my inclination was to believe it. I drove back to back

to Nesher Camp in the early hours of the morning, added a terse note to my diary entry for the previous day, and slept:

I went to Haifa late in the evening to see if Valentina was safe. I could not find her, and no one had seen her for two or three days. The Jewish victory in Haifa seems complete. All through the Arab quarters the road-blocks were now manned by Haganah.

I did not know what to think, I did not know what to write!

Ambush at Nesher

Shortly after breakfast on 23 April heavy firing broke out near Nesher Camp and a some shrapnel began to fall in 376 Petrol Platoon. Webster said that he would try to contact the Guards Brigade in Haifa. I, as second-in-command, should take charge of what he termed "the other side of things." I asked him what the other side was. "My dear chap" he said, "how can I ask the Guards for help unless you can tell me whether or not we need help." I thought of the number of times I had talked (even boasted) about my rigorous infantry training as an India Army Cadet at the Guards Depot in Caterham, and I did not know whether Webster, who had always been an RASC man, was making fun of me or was seriously expecting me to take an initiative. "We should call the platoon to arms and get some men to the main gate," I suggested. "Do as you wish," Webster replied; "that is entirely your decision." I thought that Webster was being a bit of a bastard. "Very good, sir," I replied.

The firing showed no sign of dying down, so I moved the few men I could rapidly muster – many were at the installations – to the main gate. The sentries had, wisely, sought cover elsewhere, but we were able to see just what had happened. An Arab convoy, commanded by an Iraqi officer in an armoured car, was under attack on the outskirts of Nesher only a few hundred yards away. It had obviously been proceeding towards Jenin, but had been halted by heavy fire from Haganah gunners on the roof of the Nesher Post Office. The lorries were carrying Arab soldiers, but also many refugees, women and children, had been taken aboard. I did not see how the convoy could possibly have originated in Haifa, since all exits from the town were by now under Jewish control. I assumed, rightly I think, that I was witness to the withdrawal, or attempted withdrawal, of the ALA soldiers from Balad esh-Sheikh. Webster and I, it seemed, had misinterpreted the situation. There was obviously no intended threat to Nesher Camp. Indeed, as I watched there seemed to be a stalemate. The Haganah men were clearly reluctant to risk killing women and children, but there seemed no obvious way that the Arab soldiers could extricate themselves without heavy losses. They were completely pinned down. I decided that negotiation was called for. I sent a driver to bring the Platoon's Jeep to the gate and, skirting the convoy as speedily as possible, went into Nesher. I was confident that we would not be fired on. We were not. I found the Haganah officer in charge of the operation but did not know him. He commanded a Haganah mobile unit that had been brought into Nesher to reinforce its guard unit until such time as all ALA units in the Haifa district had been disarmed. He had no advance information of the existence of the convoy, he said, and did not know where it had originated. It might have been assembled in Balad esh-Sheikh. The first he knew was that gunfire had been directed on Nesher. It came from the armoured car that had stopped at almost exactly the spot on which his men had by default targeted their guns. His unit had thus the advantage of surprise and was able to rake the convoy with fire as it came into sight. He was, he confessed, quite taken aback when he realized that there were women and children on the lorries. He had no wish to kill helpless civilians or even soldiers who had laid down their arms. He would be happy if we could arrange for the evacuation of the wounded. Indeed, he said, if I would act as intermediary I could tell the officer in charge of the convoy that he could proceed on his way. I thought that in the circumstances this was an extremely generous offer but I realized that his unit comprised only a handful of men who had no conceivable way of taking the Arabs prisoners (of war).

I returned to the scene of the ambush and spoke with the Iraqi officer whose English was excellent. His orders, he said, were to pull ALA soldiers out of the Haifa district and into areas that would be Arab under the Partition Plan. It was his understanding that this was one of the arrangements agreed upon under the truce made in Haifa. I pointed out that he might well not have been attacked had he not fired on Nesher. This, he said, was against orders and he had every intention of investigating the breach of discipline when he got to Nazareth and of punishing the offenders. The matter of the badly wounded arose. I said that I would help evacuate them, though in fact I had no idea quite what I could do other than pass this problem over to Webster. Someone then asked if I would also look after the dead. I was not confident that Webster would undertake that service. I said that I would have the bodies taken into Balad esh-Sheikh so that the mukhtar could make arrangements for relatives to collect the bodies. As the Platoon's 3-tonner arrived to assume its new role as a mortuary van a messenger from Nesher came to say that the Arab convoy might now move off. As it did so another burst of fire was directed into Nesher. This time the good samaritans of 376 Petrol Platoon were caught in the open and had to take cover in a foul-smelling drainage ditch until the convoy was a safe distance away.

One victim of the ambush remained on the road. I quote from the diary entry:

A most pathetic sight had nothing to do with the convoy as such. A couple of Arabs with a horse and cart had been bringing a load of vegetables into Nesher for sale. They had been caught in crossfire. The horse was wounded badly so I shot it. The driver, a little elderly man, still sat on the perch, dead but clutching the reins tightly. In the back of the cart lay another Arab; one leg was completely severed by a burst of fire, and was held to his body only by the long sock he wore.

I tried, helplessly, to comfort the wounded man. He spoke a little English. He begged me to call "Tony Praff," no other than my Nesher friend Naftali. I said I would. I told one of my men to go to the Cement Works to find him. Praff arrived. He greeted the Arab in the cart. "I've known this man many years," he told me; "I will take care of him." Very gently he moved the wounded man into his car and, as I learned later, had Nesher's doctor attend to him.

The 3rd Hussars

We were in the last stages of dealing with the wounded and dead in the aftermath of the ambush when three Staghouads of the 3rd Hussars, that is, the armoured cars we knew as "Stags", arrived at the scene. I assumed that Webster had talked to HQ Guards and that they in turn had ordered the Hussars to intervene. A Lieutenant was in charge. "We called you out unnecessarily," I said; "it's all over." He looked puzzled. "I don't know what you mean," he replied; "no one called us out, we heard the firing." The exchange took on a surrealistic quality. "Where are you from?" I asked. "I'm a New Zealander, but it's none of your business," he said. "I don't mean that," I replied; "where are you based?" I was informed that that was none of my business either. I pointed out that it was my business, because he was in our bailiwick. I explained how the ambush had taken place. "Well," he said, "Let me tell you what I am going to do. I am going to turn my guns on Nesher and teach the bastards a lesson." The sequel is best described by what I wrote that night:

I said that the village itself contained women, children, and old men: that he would not harm the Haganah force, which could withdraw under fire into the hills, but would kill civilians. He said that that was good: that every child killed would be one less to grow up, and every woman one less to breed. I pulled my gun out and said that I would shoot him if he gave any order to open fire on Nesher.

I had absolutely no idea whether I would have carried out my threat. I thought that the Lieutenant must have been drinking heavily that morning, and he probably thought that I had. To my great relief he shrugged and ordered the Stags away.

It was mid-morning when I arrived back at the platoon office. Webster looked with distaste at my bloodied condition. "Not again," he said; "we'll have to get you a transfer to the Royal Army Medical Corps." In the circumstances I did not find that very funny. I described the events of the morning to him. "The lieutenant," he said, "wouldn't have been a real New Zealander." He patiently explained to me that the 3rd Hussars had fought in North Africa alongside the New Zealanders, and still jokingly referred to themselves by the name of their antipodean comrades. I thought that was all well and good, but pointed out that what troubled me was that I had threatened a fellow officer, and moreover one senior to me. "Don't worry, you'll hear nothing more about it," Webster said. "Your Hussar may have had the authority to help us if we were threatened, but not to open fire on Nesher." Webster was right, and nothing more was heard about the incident.

Webster had been asked to call HQ Guards Brigade back at 12.30 that afternoon. He gave them a summary of what I had told him, omitting any reference to the pseudonymous New Zealander. He was asked to make a further report on the situation in Nesher and Balad esh-Sheikh later in the day. "There doesn't seem any serious situation left to report on," he said to me, "now that single handedly you drove off the 3rd Hussars." We decided, nevertheless, to pay a visit to the mukhtar in Nesher to get some idea of the state of things in the village.

Negotiations

Webster and I drove to the house of the mukhtar. I knew by now that his name was Lehman, and thought the combination of the two, the Turkish title and the Germanic surname, rather bizarre. His wife, I learned, was Nesher's dentist. The Haganah commander I had met earlier in the day was there. Very firmly, Webster insisted that he leave. "I have no authority to talk to you," he said. I thought that this was uncharacteristically silly, but then realized that Webster, if questioned, did not want to have to tell Brigade that one of his sources of information was a Haganah officer.

Webster and I had no particular agenda, no questionnaire prepared, so were quite relieved when the mukhtar began to talk. He would, he told us, like to meet his opposite number in Balad esh-Sheikh, and see if an agreement could be worked out to avoid further bloodshed. "The two towns have lived in peace for many years," he said, "and there is no reason why they should not go on doing so." He asked us if we would make these sentiments known in Balad esh-Sheikh. We assured him that we would, and drove immediately to the town. A few elderly councillors were in attendance on the Arab mukhtar. I had seen no signs of Arab Liberation Army soldiers, and asked the old man whether they had left the town. "They all left this morning," he said, "Allah be praised," leaving me quite sure that it was their convoy that had been ambushed.

Webster conveyed Nesher's message to the mukhtar of Balad esh-Sheikh. The latter agreed with the former, that the two places had indeed lived in peace for a long time. He himself, he declared, wanted peace. He pointed to three members of his entourage. They would accompany us back to Nesher, and speak on his behalf. Things did seem to be moving rather rapidly but, we thought, smoothly enough. The mukhtar's three representatives were settled in the back of the Jeep, and we made a stop in the camp for Webster to phone Guards Brigade. "Absolutely nothing to report, sir," I heard him say; "there won't be any trouble between Nesher and Balad esh-Sheikh."

It was about 5 p.m. when we returned to Nesher with our Arab passengers. Again, we met at Mukhtar Lehman's house. This time Webster made no objection to the presence of the Haganah officer, two or three other of his men having now joined him. Lehman assumed the role of intermediary. Much of the conversation was in Arabic, which many Palestine-born Jews spoke with fluency. Webster and I felt that matters were passing completely out of our hands. Fortunately Praff arrived, and translated for us. "Balad esh-Sheikh will not be harmed," the Haganah commander announced. Praff said to me quietly, "we don't have to be cautious about these things now, he is Dov Tzessis of the 21st Battalion."

"Balad esh-Sheikh will not be harmed," Tzessis repeated, "but there are two conditions." The first is that all weapons in the town must be surrendered by 6 p.m. today. The second is

that he, Tzessis, should be given the names of those who had murdered two Jewish men and one woman a few days before, cutting their throats and leaving the bodies in the main road just outside Nesher. I had heard nothing of this incident. After conferring briefly, the three Arabs said that they were willing to accept the terms. At the suggestion of Tzessis, who had not consulted us, their arms were to be deposited with 376 Petrol Platoon.

It was now time for Webster and me to confer. "Good heavens," said Webster; "what do we do about this?" Tzessis must have heard. He intervened. "Don't worry," he said, "yesterday your General Stockwell and our Brigade Commander Moshe Carmel agreed that, should the Arabs of Haifa accept the terms of surrender, they would hand over their arms to the Guards Brigade, which would in turn pass them on to Haganah when the Mandate ended." Webster and I had heard nothing of this arrangement. "Extraordinary business," he said; "what an astonishing thing, whoever would have thought it?" Webster had an enviable ability to sustain a soliloquy of this sort until he had given himself time to think. "We agree," he finally said; "the arms can be handed over to us."

Ultimatums

The houses of the two mukhtars could not have been much over a mile apart. Webster and I, with the three Arabs, arrived back in Balad esh-Sheikh at about 5:30, and the terms of the proposed agreement were explained. There was much excited conversation in Arabic, and a flurry of activity. To our considerable surprise, the back of the Jeep was rapidly loaded up with arms: specifically, with one Sten gun, twenty-one rifles, and an assortment of ammunition. My diary reports only twenty rifles. This was because I appropriated one as a personal souvenir. It was a Belgian piece, of World War I vintage, but like many of those handed in the sights had been at some time calibrated in Arabic.

Webster was very sceptical about the number of weapons brought out. I had told him many times just how heavily Balad esh-Sheikh was armed, which I knew from my nocturnal visits to the petrol tanks. Either I had been dreaming, he suggested, or only a few of the guns had been surrendered. "Where are all the other ones?" I asked the mukhtar. One of our labourers was interpreting for us. The mukhtar insisted that they had no more. "The Syrians," he said, meaning the ALA troops, "took all the other guns when they left the town this morning." I believed him. Balad esh-Sheikh was quieter than I had ever seen it, and certainly there was no one around who looked remotely like a soldier whether regular or irregular.

We were back in Nesher shortly after 6 p.m. There was a general disinclination to believe that our pathetic cargo represented the total armament of Balad esh-Sheikh. Tzessis phoned his Battalion Commander, who apparently said that it was necessary to be sure about the situation, because the Arab guerrillas might still be hiding in the town. The deadline for Balad esh-Sheikh to surrender weapons should be extended until midnight. At that time he himself, the Battalion Commander, wanted to meet the mukhtar and his elders and in their presence have Haganah soldiers search the town. Tzessis asked us to convey this decision to the mukhtar. Once again Webster agreed to do so, but this time with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

We returned to Balad esh-Sheikh. The mukhtar reiterated that there were no more arms in the town, but agreed to accept a Haganah search if that was the only way of showing the truth of what he said. He insisted, however, on a condition of his own: that Webster and I would be present during the search. We said that we would, and yet again shuttled back to Nesher. Tzessis could see no objection to our accompanying the search party. He asked us to keep the weapons already surrendered in the Jeep, however, because he did not want any argument with the Arabs about just what they had or had not handed over.

Over dinner that night (still the 23rd) McClenahan described how difficult it was to keep the installations working. Most of the Arab labourers had drifted away, in ones and twos, in the course of the day. "You won't have to worry about that after tonight," Webster said; "we are making arrangements with Haganah to protect Balad esh-Sheikh." I could not let that pass. "Isn't that taking a very optimistic view of things," I asked? I was thinking of the massive Arab exodus from Haifa that was still in progress. "Not at all, my dear chap,"

Webster replied. I waited for him to say more, but that was the end of conversation on that topic. After dinner I went to Webster's tent. I told him that I thought it unlikely that more guns would be handed over, the ALA having either carried them away or cached them in the hills. "I'm sure everyone will behave sensibly," Webster said, and that was that. "If you believe that, you'll believe anything," I thought, but did not voice. Webster's cheery optimism was one of his more endearing traits, but it could sometimes lead him very close to folly.

We returned to Nesher a little before midnight. This time McClenahan joined us. Tzessis introduced us to the man he had referred to as Battalion Commander. He was no other than Dan Laner whom I had met only two days before in very different circumstances. He gave no sign of recognizing me. Momentarily disconcerted, I realized that this was because of Webster's presence, Laner quite rightly assuming I had not made my commanding officer privy to our conversation. We sat down. Laner did the talking. He seemed to be in a very reasonable frame of mind. He was not necessarily going to conduct the search, he said, but he must feel absolutely sure that no ALA men were still in position in Balad esh-Sheikh. He had called a Haganah armourer from Haifa and wanted him to look over the weapons we were carrying around in the Jeep.

While the armourer went to work, Laner introduced himself. "I'm Dan Laner," he said, "in charge of the 1st Battalion, Palmach." Webster immediately remarked, "In the British Army before that, weren't you?" Laner nodded. I was impressed. "That was a brilliant hunch," I said to Webster later. "Not at all," he insisted; "do you think that after all these years I can't recognize the type." Be that as it may, the ice was broken. Laner chatted away in a relaxed manner. He told us that he been dropped behind German lines in Yugoslavia, and had served as liaison with Tito's partisans. He was still careful not to refer to his previous meeting with me.

The armourer arrived, looked at the weapons in the Jeep, and announced at they were useless and that much of the ammunition had been sabotaged. This appeared to convince Laner that all was not in order. He spoke with the Nesher mukhtar, and then asked us if we would convey yet another ultimatum to Balad esh-Sheikh. This time it was to the effect that the people of Balad esh-Sheikh had until 4 a.m. to hand in their real weapons, otherwise all women and children should be evacuated from the town. I felt very unhappy about the situation. I told Laner that I felt as sure as could be that the ALA had withdrawn its troops from Balad esh-Sheikh, and that it was their convoy that had been ambushed outside Nesher. I doubted, I said, whether there was any supply of useable arms and ammunition left in the town. "You may be right, but I can't take the risk," Laner replied; "I don't want to send in a search party and have it attacked." I could certainly see his point. Looking at Balad esh-Sheikh in the darkness, it seemed ominously quiet and it was not difficult to believe that there were gunmen concealed in the unlit houses. "As for me, I'll go along with Laner's hunch," said Webster; "fellow like that knows what he's talking about."

Thus it was that in the early hours of the morning of 24 April, the officers of 376 Petrol Platoon once more entered Balad esh-Sheikh to transmit the new ultimatum to its mukhtar. Its contents appeared to be disseminated throughout the town almost instantaneously. Within minutes lights appeared in all the buildings and people began to leave their homes for the streets. The bundles they carried with them must have been put together earlier in the night, in anticipation of trouble to come.

Webster, McClenahan and I arrived back in camp at about 2 in the morning. We all agreed that stiff drinks were in order, and over our whiskies we reviewed the situation. We were decidedly uneasy, feeling that we had been swept along in a seemingly inexorable current of events. Eighteen hours before, we had been dealing with an ambush of a small convoy at Nesher; now we were involved in an imminent Jewish attack on a sizeable Arab town. I offered some recollections of my early talks with David, saying that I thought he was sincere in his belief that Palestine should become a bi-national, that is, Arab and Jewish, state. I said that I did not think that Haganah had intended to drive the Arabs out of Haifa and that I thought the officers now in charge of the Balad esh-Sheikh operation wanted to neutralize the town but not to put its people to flight. At the same time, I said, I thought

that once the United Nations had decreed that the British Mandate should be replaced not by a bi-national state but by two separate and sovereign states, one Arab and one Jewish, so Zionism became less an expression of Jewish cultural identity and more one of Jewish political exclusivism. The belligerent posturing of Arab League states greatly strengthened this change in Jewish thinking.

I pressed my argument a little further. As I understood most of the Jews with whom I had discussed such matters, they recognized that the issue of bi-nationalism had become, for the foreseeable future, a dead one, but that many of the citizens of a Jewish state would nevertheless be Arab. A Jewish legislature would, I pointed out, be dominated by politicians of the left, whether Social Democrats (Mapai) or Socialists (Mapam). Both, and of course Communists, would advocate the equality of Arabs and Jews within the new state of Israel. Webster and McClenahan seemed persuaded by my reasoning. Webster said that we would continue to act as intermediaries between Haganah and the mukhtar of Balad esh-Sheikh, and that we would do so first, because we were part of a force supposed to secure the peace, and second, because we still had need of our reduced work force to keep McClenahan's installation working. "I wonder whether any labourers will turn up today," Webster said. It seemed highly unlikely, but the topic was not one that generated much discussion at 3 a.m. in the morning. The problem was that we dared not even doze in the hour before the ultimatum expired but the whisky being consumed to keep us awake was proving counterproductive. We chatted about trivialities. There was a tap on the door, and the duty orderly appeared. "There's a telephone call from HQ Guards Brigade, sir," the corporal said. "How did they get our number?" Webster asked. It took us a few seconds to realize that this was not a serious enquiry, for we had often jokingly toyed with the idea that the Guards Brigade thought that we had already been shipped off from Palestine. Our commanding officer, we thought, was in good form.

Webster was on the phone for about twenty minutes. He looked considerably troubled when he rejoined us. "I got a bit of a bollocking," he said. A schoolmaster in Balad esh-Sheikh had apparently supplied Brigade with an account of our visits to the mukhtar and of the messages we had transmitted. Why, Brigade wanted to know, had he, Webster, not kept it informed of these things? His explanation, that he had been too busy shuttling back and forth between Balad esh-Sheikh and Nesher to be able to supply Brigade with a communiqué.... This, said Webster, seemed to infuriate whomever he was talking to. The language used was far too indelicate to be repeated before young subalterns. McClenahan and I were pleased to see that Webster's quirkish sense of humour was returning to him, but we also knew that we would get no more detailed account of Webster's scolding. He did tell us, however, that once things had settled down we were to submit a full written report on our handling of the situation, and that in the meantime Brigade was sending a squadron of armoured cars that would arrive in Nesher Camp by daybreak. In the meantime we awaited any response to the 4 a.m. ultimatum.

Flight

Contact with the Guards Brigade gave us much to think about as we waited for the current ultimatum to expire. Webster was quick to capitalize on his knowledge that I was keeping some sort of diary. In consultation with him and McClenahan I would put together a record of our dealings with the two mukhtars. He, Webster, would then summarize the script for submission to Brigade. I never did see Webster's version but the lengthy diary entries are a poignant record of the tragedy that ensued.

The 4 a.m. deadline passed. No messengers arrived, no telephone rang, not a shot was heard. Webster commented on the fact that Brigade had given no indication of what it expected us to do but did not think it necessary for the armoured cars to arrive until daybreak. He was muttering something quite derogatory about the need of Hussars for sleep when the orderly corporal appeared again. "Take a message," Webster said. "Tell them I can't come to the phone before daybreak." The orderly looked disconcerted. "It's not the Guards, Sir," he said, "It's the Arabs."

A few hours earlier we had seen the good people of Balad esh-Sheikh emerging from their houses, bowed down under huge bundles. We had not thought to ask what they were doing and where they were going. They were in fact preparing to make their way into 376 Petrol Platoon. Some were entering by the main gate, brushing aside the guard. Others were simply cutting their way through the perimeter fence. We – that is, Webster, McClenahan and I – walked towards the installations. We were astonished to see hundreds of men, women and children spreading into every corridor between the stacks and, family by family, claiming squatter's rights to a few square yards of land under, so they hoped, British protection. The women opened their bundles, and cradled babies and small children in the assortment of cloths. Men helped themselves to jerricans and fashioned makeshift tables and chairs from them. "Bloody hell," Webster said; "now what do we do?" There was little we could do before sunrise other than to let our guests continue to arrive and settle in. Where are you now when I need you, Mohammed, I thought?

After the assassination of his brother I had made Mohammed chief timekeeper, but had not seen him for several days. I spotted, among the throng, several of the platoon's labourers who I knew spoke English. I called them together. "I am appointing you wardens," I announced, grandly. I have no idea why I chose the word "warden," but I think they rapidly decided that the most appropriate translation was ghaffir. "You will keep order," I said, "and you will organize supplies of water." Wisely, I did not mention food, since I knew we had no means of feeding our multitude. Notwithstanding the darkness the new ghaffirs began to move about in purposeful ways, and what more (when all is said and done) could be expected in such circumstances?

There was an air of expectancy among the squatters. The 4 a.m. deadline had passed, no further weapons had been surrendered, and Haganah might now decide to withdraw its soldiers and allow Balad esh-Sheikh to be reoccupied. The first streaks of dawn appeared. Then, at precisely 5 a.m., the attack on Balad esh-Sheikh was launched. Heavy mortar and automatic weapon fire was laid on the town from positions above it. It was an impressive display of power. I watched from the camp, reasonably sure that everyone had fled. It was at this stage that the squadron of the 3rd Hussars arrived as promised, just at daybreak. The armoured cars took up positions along the main road, and the Haganah units halted the bombardment. Webster said that I should stay in the platoon office, and he would deal with the Hussars. "You might meet your New Zealand chum again, and we've got enough on our hands without you starting a private war." He drove off. I felt quite smug as I saw the squadron withdraw in the direction of Haifa before Webster had even reached the main gate. "Another victory for the Hussars," I thought, "and all over in fifteen minutes." But what was all over? We had no idea whether Haganah would resume the attack. We had no idea what to do about the hundreds of squatters – or were they now refugees – for whom we had neither food nor sanitary facilities. And then there was the awkward matter of the horse. This was a rather miserable looking animal that someone had brought into the installations, where it promptly died. Its carcass already began to swell as the morning heated up. All in all, it looked like being quite a day – and that was even before Major Dewar arrived on the scene.

Dewar

Major Dewar was a rather elusive sort of person who was still designated Officer in Charge, Nesher Camp, but was virtually unknown to the officers of 376 Petrol Platoon. My only previous contact with him had been in the context of the corporal charged with absenting himself from camp without permission. Certainly he knew nothing of the negotiations of the night of 23/24 April. The last thing that Webster and I wanted was his intervention in affairs. He was not privy to our understanding with Haganah and was not known for his sympathy towards the Jewish cause. The 5 a.m. bombardment presumably awakened him. He was understandably quite astonished to find the installations occupied by hundreds of milling refugees. That, of course, was sufficient to make things his business. Webster gave him a summary of what had happened. "Never heard of such a thing in all my life," Dewar exclaimed, which we thought quite possibly true but not very helpful. "Must do something about it, what?" he added, to which we could only assent. He saw the dead animal. "What

were you doing with a horse in the camp?" he exclaimed; "you're not cavalry, you know." I was about to inform him that it had come into the camp disguised as an Arab, but Webster broke in and probably saved me from a sharp reprimand. To our amazement Dewar ordered that all the Arab men were to be ejected from the camp immediately. He seemed to have no idea that many of them were labourers on the platoon's books for whom we felt considerable responsibility, and in any case, if we drove the men out of the camp who then would take care of the women and children? How, we wondered, would Haganah react if those who had fled Balad esh-Sheikh began to move back to their homes?

We discussed our possible courses of action, and decided that we could do nothing without first consulting the Haganah officers on the spot. We felt, however, that we should no longer do this without informing Dewar. I am glad to say that we were able totally to mislead him. We told him that the small Haganah unit in Nesher had perhaps carried out the attack at 5 a.m. and that despite the noise it had very little firepower. We knew some of its members, we said, and thought we could persuade them to cooperate with us. "Splendid," said Dewar; "tell them that I order them to let the men return to Balad esh-Sheikh." We didn't know that Dewar would report the nonsense we had told him to HQ Guards Brigade, but I later found out that he did just this, but not until 7.30 a.m.

At 8 a.m. Webster and I were in Nesher once again. I did not record whether we met Dan Laner or Dov Tzessis on this occasion, and my memory fails me. We described the situation in Nesher Camp. Laner or Tzessis, whichever it was, pointed out that for Haganah nothing had really changed. It was still impossible to be sure that no ALA soldiers were in Balad esh-Sheikh but he would, he said, extend the deadline yet again, to 2 p.m. that afternoon. If by then an acceptable quantity of arms and ammunition had been handed in, the refugees might return to Balad esh-Sheikh accompanied by Haganah patrols. I rather suspected that the idea was to have the refugees serve as a human shield against surprise attack, but I had very little no doubt that if no opposition was encountered, they would be permitted to return to their homes.

We drove back to the installations. Dewar had not been very successful in ejecting the men. It would have required considerable force, and he seemed to have given up the idea. In fact, he was nowhere to be seen. I called the ghaffirs together, that is, and explained the new Haganah ultimatum to them. They were bewildered. How, they asked, could they hand more arms and ammunition in when they did not have any more? The "Syrians," they reiterated, had left Balad esh-Sheikh taking all the weapons with them. There was no question in my mind that they were telling the truth. I said that I would talk to the Haganah officers and try to persuade them of this. The ghaffirs conveyed my response to the men and there was much shouting and gesticulating. I asked the ghaffirs the cause of the commotion, and was taken completely by surprise. Those who were not from Balad esh-Sheikh by origin but were essentially lodgers in the town comprised a majority of the refugees in the camp. They were saying that they would resist any attempt to return them to Balad esh-sheikh. They wanted transport to any one of a number of towns that would, so they had every reason to believe, be in the Arab part of Palestine after Partition. Nazareth, Jenin and Acre seemed most in demand. I looked at the enormous bundles they and their wives and all but the smallest children were carrying, and realized that these particular labourers had packed virtually all that they owned. They begged us to help them, and made it clear that if we could not or would not, then they would simply take to the roads on foot.

To evacuate the hundreds of refugees in the camp was completely beyond our meagre transport resources, but something had to be done quickly. Conditions in the installations had already become squalid and, I judged, dangerous to health. I had no idea how rapidly an epidemic of typhoid or heavens knows else what might break out, but assumed it was a matter of hours rather than days. Webster came over. He asked me to have the refugees told once more that no harm would come to them if they returned to their homes under Haganah supervision, and that we – the three platoon officers – would guarantee their safety by entering Balad esh-Sheikh with them. But I knew, and they knew, that we could not guarantee any such thing. They spoke together, their voices becoming shrill and angry, and with even greater vehemence they made clear their refusal to return to their homes. I felt

defeated. "Do you want to talk to them?" I asked Webster. "Seems no point," he said. I don't think there was, but there was an unknown factor. In the current state of confusion there was no way of determining how many of the several hundreds of people in the installations did in fact consider Balad esh-Sheikh their hometown and were prepared to risk returning to it.

To our dismay Dewar reappeared. He wanted to know whether we were going to get the installations working that morning. "I haven't even thought about it, sir," Webster replied, and walked away. "The stupid bugger doesn't have a clue about what's going on," he said to me. He took a decision. We would go in person to HQ Guards Brigade, and request their intervention. If we telephoned, he said, they would probably send out the 3rd Hussars again with orders to eject the refugees. I suggested that I should perhaps remain at the installations with McClenahan. Webster turned the suggestion down, saying that the Jews were not any threat while the Arabs were in Nesher Camp. I said that it was not the Jews I was worried about, but Dewar. Webster took the point, but repeated that he wanted me with him. "I'll seem to be much more important if I have a dogsbody with me," he explained. I treated that remark with the contempt it deserved. We did not ask Dewar's permission to go, but simply told him what had been decided. "Splendid," he said, "frightfully good idea. Tell them you are carrying out my orders and that everything is under control."

"As fast as you can," Webster told the driver. The rush of wind through the Jeep made conversation impossible. As we approached the Jewish checkpoint at Wadi Rushmiyya I told the driver to slow down. "Don't slow down," Webster said. He was in a strange mood, perhaps having to do with his unaccustomed lack of sleep (never having had to dip the platoon's tanks). I was quite annoyed when the Haganah men carelessly waved us through.

HQ Guards Brigade exuded efficiency. The Duty Corporal called the Duty Sergeant, who called the Duty Officer, who escorted us to the Adjutant, a tall, thin man with a handlebar moustache. We saluted. "Good lord, and where are you lot from?" he asked. "Captain Webster of 376 Petrol Platoon," said Webster, "and this is Mr. Wilks, my second-in-command." The Adjutant introduced himself as Captain Walker of the 1st Guards Brigade." He appeared amused. "Run out of razor blades out there, have you?" Webster and I, not having anticipated visiting the inner sanctum of the Brigade, had indeed not given a thought to shaving that busy morning. We were seated. "Walker, Webster and Wilks," he said; "we sound like a firm of lawyers." We laughed, which was obviously the right thing to do. "How's that old buffer, Dewar?" the Adjutant asked. "I had a message from him only a few hours ago." He rifled through his papers and found the text. It was in five copies. "One of these has to go back to Dewar," he said; "why don't you take it to him?" It was Dewar's communication of 7.30. It read:

Arrangements being made for evacuation of women and children. Queries about labour for petrol station by Maj. Dewar as this all comes from Balad es Sheikh. Attack not thought to have been by [more than] 20 or so men. 2 3inch mortars, 4 light machine guns, few rifles (probable firepower of Jews). Haganah detachment from Cement factory mainly.

Is that accurate, the Adjutant asked?

Webster explained the situation rather more fully, pointing out that the 21st Battalion of Haganah had carried out the attack. It was our guess, he said, that there were upwards of 800 squatters in the camp, excluding children. "Well, we must do what we can," said the adjutant. He summoned the Transport Officer. "I want a convoy at Nesher Camp within an hour. Reckon on 1000 people. Take them to Acre." He turned to us. "Anything else I can do?" he asked; "shall I have one of the drivers bring some razor blades?" I ventured to speak. I said that I thought most of the refugees wanted to go to Nazareth or Jenin rather than Acre. "Can't be done," he said; "my authority only allows me to take them to Acre." I hoped that Webster would ask why. He did not. We guessed that reports had reached Brigade that Nazareth and Jenin were already swamped with refugees from Haifa.

Webster and I arrived back in camp at about 11 a.m. The situation was much as we had left it. We had the plans for evacuation explained to the refugees. Most of them, having no interest in returning to Balad esh-Sheikh and therefore no inclination to await the outcome of the 2 p.m. ultimatum, were prepared to board lorries and take advantage of the relative security that Acre seemed to offer. The convoy, of some twenty or so lorries, arrived at about 11:15. Dewar appeared, and watched the proceedings. "Splendid," he said, "We can always rely on the Guards." Fortunately no one took any notice of him whatsoever. My temporary ghaffirs cooperated with the Guards and everything went in a smooth and orderly fashion. By 1 p.m. or thereabouts the last lorry moved out of camp. I pointed out to its driver that he had forgotten to take the horse, by then almost visibly distending. Gravely, he read through his movement order, and said that it did not mention any animal whether dead or alive.

After the evacuation only a few people remained in the installations, and they were preparing to leave. I was quite unclear about what had happened to the labourers and their families who did hope to return to their homes. They seemed to have been fewer than I had thought, though some may have concealed themselves in the camp's wasteland to await the outcome of the 2 p.m. ultimatum. Others, I was sure, had drifted away to find temporary resting places in one or other of the small Arab villages in the neighbourhood. I remained convinced that the Haganah officers would allow those whose town it was to repossess their homes before nightfall that day. I might have seen things with greater prescience at the time had I known of Haganah's Plan D.

Balad esh-Sheikh

The 2 p.m. deadline of 24 April was rapidly approaching. Webster, pointing out that he was a much older man than I was, said that I could deal with that while he put his feet up. I walked into Nesher. Dov Tzessis was there. I explained all that had happened, and reiterated my view that there were no soldiers left in Balad esh-Sheikh. This time he believed me. He would lead a small patrol in, he said. He assumed that I would accompany it. So Tzessis, two other Haganah officers with perhaps 20 men with rifles and Sten guns, and one British subaltern with a pistol, entered the town. The bombardment nine hours earlier had done surprisingly little damage. There were no corpses on the streets, no buildings still burning.

The Jewish soldiers fanned out, moving rapidly along the streets and darting in and out of houses. Reports came back that no more than half a dozen or so people had been found. Most were old women who had simply refused to leave their homes but, so someone said, had tongues so sharp that they should have been handed in with the guns! Tzessis was satisfied. He called in the remainder of his soldiers. The Jewish flag was hoisted on one of the taller buildings in the town. From a healthy distance I watched a young soldier deal with a 35-kilo bomb that had failed to explode. I watched a number of machine gun posts being established on various rooftops, some of them set up by soldiers of the ALA no more than a few weeks before. I was taken aback. I asked Tzessis if he really expected any counterattack. No, he said, but certain routine procedures had to be followed. I asked him if he really expected that the people of Balad esh-Sheikh would return to their homes. No, he said; they would be allowed but not encouraged to do so! This was not quite what I had anticipated.

Nesher Camp

Late in the afternoon I walked back from Nesher to the camp. From the main gate I could see that Balad esh-Sheikh was being looted. I was too far away to identify the culprits with confidence, but my diary has the note, "where the bands emerged from I do not know, but there were British soldiers and Mauritians there, as well as Haganah." I could see goats and fowl, and a few horses, being rounded up. I was relieved to think that the looting was surely now no longer a matter for the British security forces but for those of the Jews. I had temporarily forgotten that we, the former, did have a problem in Nesher Camp that we could scarcely delegate to the Jews, namely, one dead horse. While Webster and I had been going about our respective pursuits, McClenahan had been busily mobilizing the resources of 376 Petrol Platoon to deal with this rather indecorous matter. Unerringly, he noted that the one resource that the Platoon had in abundance was petrol, and that the carcass should therefore

be incinerated. By the time I arrived McClenahan had already had it dragged into a large sunken concrete tank that had probably once been used to collect rainwater. A line had then been run from the installations and hundreds of gallons of petrol pumped into the tank. All that remained to be done was to ignite the petrol, and all the men of the platoon had turned out in festive mood (as if this was to a sort of Christmas bonfire). Much to our astonishment the petrol failed to behave in an expected way: it would not light. Flaming torches hurled into the tank simply went out, deprived of sufficient oxygen even to sustain their own heat. Webster arrived on the scene. I described the problem to him. "You're supposed to be the Platoon's fire officer," he said, "so show us what they taught you." I pointed out that in his wisdom he had sent me to Egypt to learn to fight fires, not to start them. He began a story about an Indian maharaja who had an elephant on which he was travelling drop dead under him. It threatened to be a long tale and one of very doubtful relevance. Fortunately his soliloquy was abruptly terminated as the fire-raising efforts of a lance-corporal finally bore fruit. The tank exploded into flame. The column of smoke was seen as far away as Haifa, and within twenty minutes we not only had a fire but a Fire Brigade. Webster suggested that I might like to deal with the matter. I pointed out that as a subaltern I had just dealt with a Haganah battalion, but that as a captain it seemed more appropriate that he should deal with the Fire brigade. "Like you did with the Guards Brigade," I added for good measure. I did not wait for Webster to deal with my sophistry, but went to the tranquillity of my tent. It seemed remarkably cool after the clamour of the pyre side and I caught a couple of hour's sleep before dinner.

None of us had any inclination to linger in the Mess after Jad Mohammed had seen to our culinary needs. I decided to devote the rest of the evening to bringing my diary up to date. I did this knowing that Webster wanted to use it preparing his report for HQ Guards Brigade. But perhaps, just perhaps, I had a sense that I had been watching history being made, though not even in my wildest flights of imagination could I have guessed that what became known as the Arab Refugee Problem would, more than half a century later, still be a matter of acute controversy and a major obstacle to peace in the Middle East. Be this as it may, certainly something moved me to record the events of 23-24 April in much greater detail than was my usual practice. The account given here is based closely upon the eleven pages of longhand that I wrote in the late evening of the 24th. It was about midnight when I pulled together a few concluding, and sad, remarks:

The Arabs have gone, carrying what they could with them. The rest has been looted, the few belongings they had to leave, and the horses, goats and fowl. I don't know what would have happened had the Arabs allowed an immediate search of the town. I believe that the mukhtar of Nesher was sincere in wanting peace; I believe that even the Haganah commander would have left them in the town once sure that it was neutralized. But the Arabs, by and large, believed that their lives were in danger, and fled. On both sides the nationalistic forces have prevailed, the reactionary Arab and reactionary Jewish leaderships. What now of the organizations that wanted Arab-Jewish cooperation: the by no means negligible United Workers' Party and the National Liberation League? Perhaps in some future period of reconstruction their voices will be moderating ones again, but now only the bullet speaks.

As I closed the diary I realized that the frenzied activity of the last two days had scarcely allowed me to think of Valentina. If she was dead I had failed to grieve and if she was alive I had failed to rejoice.

Over breakfast the next morning, that of 25 April, conversation focused on the changed circumstances of the platoon. There were no Arab Legion soldiers to guard our tanks, no Arab labourers to man our installations, and fewer and fewer customers (legitimate ones, that is) for whatever petrol we had. Webster thought that the remaining British units in Haifa would increasingly draw their fuel from the port facilities, and that our operational role would soon come to an end.

I went into Nesher village after breakfast. Looking towards Balad esh-Sheikh I saw no one on the streets but the Jewish flag still flew over one of the taller buildings. A continuous

stream of refugees moved along the main road in the direction of Nazareth or Jenin. Many of them were desperately hungry, and begged for money to buy food. I did not find Praff or his wife at home so on a whim I went to greet the mukhtar, Lehman. He was pleased to see me. "Yesterday," he said, "we thought you were leaving us and were burning your camp down." He was highly amused by the account of the dead horse. We discussed the current situation. That night I recorded his views as faithfully as I could. I found them very touching. "The mukhtar," I wrote,

is a very wise and sad man. He seems to belong to another generation, one that had different ideals. "The people of Balad esh-Sheikh," he said, "were some of my best and oldest friends. Our children grew up together. But the war came, and I did not recognize my own son when he came back. We have always trained our children in the methods of fighting, but we have also tried to teach them not to misuse the power we have given them. But some of them have. Some will kill Arabs and British, and even their own people, on the least provocation." I really do not think that this man gains any pleasure from seeing the Jewish flag flying over Balad esh-Sheikh.

The diary for the same day makes reference to reports having to do with the fighting in Haifa. "The Arab press and radio," I wrote, "have become violently anti-Russian. Arab Army HQ in Damascus has announced that Russian troops were fighting side by side with Haganah in the battle for Haifa." This, I commented, "is very crude propaganda indeed."

Arms for Palmach

I received a phone call from Dan Laner around noon on 25 April, suggesting that we meet for a drink at the Piccadilly that afternoon. It was a Sunday and I was not on duty. Webster readily made the Jeep available. I felt sure that the meeting would have to do with the firearms in Haifa Port, but I hoped that I might first get news about Valentina and that the news would be good.

I saw several Jewish patrols on the way into Haifa, though whether they were Haganah or IZL I could not tell. None took any notice of a solitary British vehicle on the road. I guessed that the patrols were intended to prevent the looting of Arab property.

The Piccadilly was crowded but the barman took me to a small private yard. Laner was seated there with a man whom I did not know and whose name, or code name, I cannot recollect. David joined us shortly after, and Laner went inside to order drinks. As if on cue, David began to talk about Valentina. He knew, he said, that I was very anxious for news about her and he had to tell me that there was none. If she had been killed, then her body had not been found. I found this very odd. I had long thought that in her political life Valentina functioned in some way under the oversight of David, and if this was so then I did not see how he could so completely have lost contact with her.

Laner returned to the table and the barman brought a bottle of red and one of white wine. Again, as if on cue, David poured himself a glass of red, downed it rapidly, and left. The conversation turned to the matter of immigration. Had I heard about the Mishmar Ha'am, he asked? It had been intercepted by the Navy last night, and brought into Haifa. There were about 800 refugees on board. Early this morning they were all transferred to a British vessel bound for Cyprus. There is another ship nearing Haifa, he added, with over 500 refugees on board. The captain has already been informed that he will be boarded as soon as he enters Palestinian waters. Unexpectedly, Laner asked me if I had been in love with Valentina. I said that I thought I had. He asked if Valentina had been in love with me. I said that I hoped she had. I began to see where the conversation was going. If Valentina was dead, Laner asked, would I still want to help him get the arms for his battalion out of Haifa Port? I said that my willingness to help was based on political instincts that I brought with me to Palestine. "Perhaps she is not dead," he said in a soft voice, and we proceeded to business.

The plan, Laner said, remained as he had outlined it at the previous meeting. If I could get the lorry to the weighbridge in Haifa Port, then the Haganah unit there would look after everything else. He then introduced me to his companion, who had taken no part in the

conversation. I realized that he spoke no English. "This is Benny," Laner said; "he's a member of our unit in the docks and will be in charge of the operation." We agreed to proceed with things the next day. I said that I would use Pioneers to load our 3-tonner in the morning. With Laner translating, Benny said that he hoped to add two crates to our load, so we should pack loosely and perhaps include some empty boxes that could be discarded on the quayside. I knew that the entrances to the Port were closed at 6 p.m., I said that I would arrive at about 5:15 when the marines on guard were tired and waiting to be relieved, and that we should aim to rendezvous at the weighbridge at about 5.30.

Agreement was reached and Benny left. As I was about to follow, to my surprise Laner produced a watch from his case and passed it to me. It was Swiss, it seemed to be gold, and it had a multiplicity of small dials. I was unsure what I was supposed to do. Should I admire it and pass it back? Should I ask if I might borrow it for tomorrow's rendezvous at the docks? Laner saw that I was embarrassed. "It is a present," he said, simply; "you were a great help to us in avoiding a heavy loss of life in Balad esh-Sheikh." I have never been sure whether I should have accepted that watch, but I did and I have it to this day.

At dinner that evening, that of the 25th, I told Webster and McClenahan that I was planning to take our 3-tonner to the weighbridge the next day. I was afraid, I said, that if we did not quickly get a return in to HQ we were in danger of losing our place in the queue for shipping. I also pointed out that we could certainly not establish our total weight without making more than one trip to Haifa Port. Webster said that he had been thinking along the same lines and was delighted that I had taken the initiative.

I cannot say that I was not more than a little nervous on 26 April. The Basuto and other Pioneers soon realised that my object was not so much to fill the lorry as to make it look full. Their's not to reason why! They much enjoyed dealing with a whiter-than-white toilet bowl that we had never managed to hook up to any water supply. They had it so placed that it towered majestically over the whole cargo. I doubted whether we would reach the entrance to the Port without it toppling over, but we did. I explained to the driver why we had to have the 3-tonner weighed and he, being a commonsensical sort of man, rightly saw the whole business as nonsensical. I told him that the Nesher Cement Works had asked me, as a favour, to pick up some goods they had purchased from Europe but had been unable to collect from the docks.

The marines on guard took down details of our vehicle and of the purpose of our visit. One of them, eyeing the toilet bowl, congratulated us on being prepared for any emergency, and provided directions to the weighbridge. We found it manned by several civilian employees of the Port Authority, among whom I recognized Benny. Things moved swiftly and smoothly. We were given a chit recording our laden weight. Benny stood on the running board of our lorry; directed the driver a few hundred yards between huge stacks of crates, and told him to stop. A squad of dockworkers materialized, set to work, and within two or three minutes had remade our load to accommodate two additional crates and had then carefully restored the toilet bowl to its commanding position. We were on our own. We drove back to the main gate and were cheerfully ushered through.

I felt very relieved when we drove into the familiar yard of the Nesher Cement Works and several men set about unloading the crates. On the short way back to camp the driver told me that one of the workmen had handed him a small envelope. He had not opened it so should he pass it on to me? I said that I was sure it had nothing to do with me and that it probably contained a ticket to some show in Haifa to express appreciation of the help we had given them. I thought the matter best left at that. As it turned out, I made only the one run for Haganah. Our HQ seemed to have decided that weighing the moveable property of static units served no useful purpose, and so the question of a second run, to my relief, never arose.

Balad esh-Sheikh

On the morning of 28 April Naftali Praff telephoned me and asked if I would bring Webster to meet him in Balad esh-Sheikh. There was something having to do with the Platoon's loss of petrol that he wanted us to see. Praff took us into the kitchen of a large

house. He asked us to turn on the water taps. I think by then we had guessed what to expect. I quote the diary for that day:

At a number of points, junctions have been skilfully inserted into the main petrol pipeline and these had been then linked to the water pipes in several houses. So you turned on the tap at the sink – and petrol came through. I wonder where the admirable initiative came from – our own labourers who lived in Balad esh-Sheikh, or the Syrian “defenders” of the town.

I was fairly sure of the answer: the “defenders.” I knew from my visit to Jenin that the Arab forces there were not lacking in vehicles but suffered, I thought, from an acute shortage of petrol. For a considerable period 376 Petrol Platoon had obviously been an important source of supply for the ALA. I recollected how furious McClenahan and I had been at C.RASC’s insistence that we had dipped to the Platoon’s tanks incorrectly and the refusal to investigate the matter further.

A Haganah officer arrived and asked Webster what he wanted done about taps on the pipeline. Webster took objection to the man’s attitude, told him that he naturally expected the leaks to be sealed off, and walked away. I could not even guess how much petrol remained in the Platoon’s tanks above Balad esh-Sheikh, and I thought it likely that they were no longer being replenished from the Consolidated Refineries Ltd., which was itself scaling down its Haifa operations. For some time HQ RASC had seemed to lose interest in the level of our Platoon’s tanks, and we had assumed that whatever stock of fuel we held would be written off at the end of the Mandate. Whatever the case, I had no intention of attempting to dip the tanks ever again.

Webster having gone to Nesher with Praff, I took the opportunity of wandering around Balad esh-Sheikh. I did not see a single Arab, but I was astonished at the number of Jewish workmen who were descending on the town and taking on a wide range of household and yard chores. My diary for the 28th has the entry,

Today builders, plumbers, sanitary engineers and so forth have launched a new invasion of Balad esh-Sheikh. It is to be prepared for the reception of new immigrants who will flood in with the end of the Mandate.

I did not think that this was quite what Webster, McClenahan and I had in mind when the decision was taken that Balad esh-Sheikh had to be “neutralized.” We found it impossible to believe that the town was being cleaned up pending the return of its Arab citizens. And another troubling report reached us. Many of those who had taken refuge in the Platoon’s installations had been evacuated to Acre courtesy of the Guards Brigade. This was on 24 April. It was, then, with a sense of profound dismay that we heard that a heavy Jewish attack on Acre had taken place only two days later. I felt a residual responsibility for the well-being of the Platoon’s former employees, and hoped that their suffering might soon come to an end.

I spent the evening of the 28th in Miriam’s bar in Nesher. I hoped to find out more about the extraordinary activity in Balad esh-Sheikh for I was sure many of the men at work there were from Nesher. It became apparent that I had arrived in the middle of an extended debate. Praff was there, called me to sit with him, and did his best to give me the gist of the Yiddish. I gathered that some of the older men argued that even the land on which Nesher was built belonged to the Arabs whose ownership of it had been recognized throughout Turkish times. The people of Balad esh-Sheikh should be welcomed back to their homes. So far as I could make out no one present argued that the Jews has an historic claim to the whole land of Palestine, but it was the opinion of many of those present that by abandoning their town the Arabs had in some way broken the bond that tied it to them and them to it. This view seemed to be the basis for a different argument to the effect that there were many thousands of Jews in refugee camps in Europe, in British confinement in Cyprus, and on the high seas who had to be resettled in Palestine and would be in need of housing and jobs. They should have a right to places abandoned by Arabs.

Praff invited me to return home with him. I did so, having usually found him easy to talk to. I said how troubled I was beginning to feel about the part that Webster and I had played in the Arab evacuation of Balad esh-Sheikh. Praff claimed that all over the Haifa area Arab leaders had been telling people to seek refuge in safe places and wait for the Arab League states to invade Palestine, defeat the Jews, and restore everyone to their homes. I remembered Tewfik having said something like this, speaking of hijra or flight as the prelude to jihad or war. Praff said that if I understood this then I should understand why many senior Jewish commanders had welcomed the departure of so many Arabs from Haifa and its surrounds and had resolved to resettle Jewish refugees in their place. This was the first time I heard of the Jewish "Plan D," though it was only later that I came to know of it by that name.

On my return to Camp I talked the matter over with Webster, who said that Praff had expressed much the same views to him. Not surprisingly we both had the same thought. Had our attempts to broker peace between the mukhtar and elders of Balad esh-Sheikh on the one hand, and the Haganah officers on the other, achieved nothing other than to win time for the latter to obtain directions from their High Command? We were both inclined to believe that neither Laner nor Tsessis had originally intended to drive the people of Balad esh-Sheikh from their town. We therefore concluded that in the course of the protracted negotiations they had received orders from above to do precisely what they had not intended. The politics of the matter escaped us at that late time of night but there was breaking news that would cast a quite different light on the situation in Haifa. The Palestine Post reported that on 28 April the Mayor and Councillors had issued a statement intended to clarify affairs. It read,

Instructing Arabs and Jews to carry on normally, the commander stated that liaison offices between Haganah and the local administration were being set up. There would be committees on Arab economic and legal affairs, including Police and administration.

A committee will look after abandoned Arab property and the Holy Places, and so help in restoring Arab life to normal. Property left by evacuees will be held in trust for them.

Webster and I put our heads together again. It was the end of April and the Mandate ended at midnight on 14 May. Webster assured me that he had no information from Headquarters that he had not passed on. We did not know whether the Platoon would be relocated or disbanded and therefore had no idea where we might be, and in what capacity, a few weeks ahead. In the meantime we had to deal with the new political landscape in Haifa District. We knew that Haganah wished to take over the Petrol Platoon intact, but we were getting contradictory messages about Jewish intentions with regard to the Arabs. Were those living in areas assigned to the Jews under the Partition Plan to be expelled, or were they to be accepted as citizens of the Jewish State about to be created? In the last week of April this confronted us as a practical matter; by the end of the month it had become a moral conundrum.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MAY 1948

Nesher

It was both May Day and a Shabat. I walked into Nesher in the morning, and noticed that the Red Flag was flying over Balad esh-Sheikh, side by side with the Star of David. Naftali Praff, as always, was welcoming. Several of his friends were with him. The talk was of an agreement several days earlier, bringing Haganah and IZL under one command. No one present liked the deal. They spoke of politicians whom they referred to as the Revisionists. They are the political counterparts of the IZL terrorists, they said, and had bluffed the Zionist General Council into negotiating the pact. But Labour would not go along with it. The Revisionists can never become a serious force within a Jewish State. We all know that. No alliance between the Histadruth (the Federation of Labour) and the Revisionists could survive. Neither Mapai nor Mapam was in favour of making any deal with the IZL. "You know," Praff said, "the IZL and the Revisionists used to wear black shirts. Jews of the left and right used to spend more time fighting and even killing each other than worrying about the Arabs." I mentioned the Stern Gang. "Families have become divided," said someone present; "the son of one of the men who shot Stern did himself join the Stern Gang." Someone else added his piece. "You must realize," he said, "that the Stern Gang and the IZL have very different politics. The Stern Gang is pro-Russian, and the IZL is pro-American." It was Praff, I think, who ended the conversation by remarking that the terrorist gangs would wither away after the British left, and so would the Revisionists. Mapai and Mapam between them command almost all the Jewish vote. Everyone nodded in agreement. In my diary that night I made a note of this, and added, "I wonder!" It was a very brief but, as things turned out, very prescient comment.

David

David called me at about noon to suggest a drink that evening, at the end of Shabat. I was still a little unhappy about our recent meetings, for he had seemed subtly changed, but it was May Day and I felt I should be comradely. I agreed. I had a driver drop me at the Piccadilly. I spotted David sitting at a table in an ill-lit corner of the lounge. There was a woman with him. As I approached I realized that it was Valentina. What does one say in such circumstances? A number of greetings flashed through my mind. "I'm so pleased that you're not dead." That would hardly do. "Welcome back to the land of the living." Too jovial, and worse, trite. "Hello, Ivor," Valentina said. "How good to see you," I replied, lamely, and sat down. David started talking without making any allusion to Valentina's disappearance, but took up the matter of Jewish refugees. He repeated what Laner had told me, that the passengers on the Mishmar Ha'am had been shipped off to Cyprus, and that since then the same had happened to the 500 or so passengers on the Nahshon. You must understand, he told me, that in two weeks time the Arab neighbours of Palestine will take up arms against the Jews of Palestine. We will be massively outnumbered. A few weeks ago Jewish leaders had met to discuss strategy. It was agreed that the highest priority should be assigned to gathering in the refugees and drafting as many as possible (and as rapidly as possible) into the defence forces. The relocation of the Jewish immigrants would inevitably involve some dislocation of the indigenous Arabs...

I stopped David to say that I quite understood the point he was making, but how much dislocation of Arab life was permissible? That was a question he could not answer, he said, because individual Haganah and IZL commanders would inevitably put different interpretations on such decisions according to their political affiliations. "I'll tell you something in confidence," he added, "because it is relevant to Balad esh-Sheikh and Nesher." Haganah was at present having problems about its policy towards the Arab refugees. Many of the senior Haganah commanders took it for granted that they should protect abandoned Arab property, and make it as easy as possible for the refugees to return and resettle in their

old homes. This had always been the view of Moshe Carmel, and virtually all the officers of the Carmeli Brigade in Haifa and western Galilee were quite public in their support for Mapam. If the creation of a bi-national Palestine was no longer possible, then they remained committed to working for a bi-national Jewish state. But now, David said, more and more politicians were saying that once Arabs left their homes and took up residence elsewhere, then they should not be allowed to return. Many officers of the Golani Brigade in eastern Galilee were coming to think this way.

"How do you really feel about this, David?" I asked. He paused for a few seconds before replying. "I don't like what has happened in Balad esh-Sheikh. You know, don't you, that Jews are already moving into Arab houses?" I had in fact been sure that this was happening, though I had no longer any reason to visit the town. "I don't think that this is what Dov Tzessis intended when he took Balad esh-Sheikh," I remarked. "No," David said; "many of us feel that there is something very, very wrong when we have to make Arabs homeless in order to provide homes for Jews." David paused, then added, "I don't mind telling you that Dan Laner had been ready to hand authority in Balad esh-Sheikh back to the Mukhtar and Council but was ordered from above to proceed with the bombardment."

What I did not seem to understand, David explained, was how very dangerous the situation was at the present time. A very senior Haganah officer had told him only a few days before that members of the IZL High Command were greatly angered on learning of the British decision to maintain control of Haifa Port after the end of the Mandate, which meant that its facilities could be denied to the Jewish forces for an indeterminate period. The regional commanders were urging Haganah to seize the Port immediately, using whatever force was necessary. If Haganah were prepared to do this, then IZL would concentrate its forces on the defence of Jerusalem.

I asked David if such an arrangement between Haganah and IZL was a good idea. Haifa Port had the capacity, he said, for the British to continue to evacuate men and materiel at the same time as the Jews were landing immigrants and vital supplies. The British High Commissioner, however, was understood to have stated that his government would not agree to any such arrangement and was indeed reinforcing the security forces in Haifa with troops from Cyprus. That being so, David believed that IZL had a strong case for taking Haifa Port by force but thought that most Haganah commanders would draw back from the heavy losses that would undoubtedly be incurred in any such confrontation.

I asked David how many refugees he thought might arrive in Palestine within a few weeks of the end of the Mandate. He said he could only speak for Cyprus. There were, he said, about 40,000 Jews in British concentration camps on the island. I queried his use of the term. "Well, they are as bad as concentration camps," he said; "conditions in them are terrible." I asked him how he knew that. "Of course I know," he replied. "We have Haganah units working in them, and sometimes the inmates are so weak from lack of food that it is impossible to drill them." I asked him if he thought the Jews were allowed to drill in the German concentration camps. David was becoming quite angry and I must say that so was I. Valentina looked uncomfortable and said nothing. I pointed out that I too thought British policy towards the Jewish refugees was appallingly wrong. "I'm glad to hear that," he said. I found this comment offensive in the extreme. "I'm pleased to hear that you are at least troubled by the Arabs who are being displaced from their homes in and around Haifa," I snapped.

David said that he must go. I was not sure of his mood. We never had the chance to smooth things out for I was never to see him again. I learned later that he had been posted to a camp somewhere on the Lebanese border. I much missed him. There was a considerable difference in our ages, and I think he had seen himself as my mentor in Palestinian affairs. Without doubt I learned a great deal from him, and we became good friends. I remember him as being quite tall, lean, and always bursting with energy. He was as fiercely attached to Zionist ideals as he was to Socialist principles. Curiously, I don't remember ever knowing him as anything but David, and no other name appears in my diary or letters.

Valentina

Valentina seemed as relieved as I was at David's departure. "Hello again, Ivor," she said; "did you miss me?" I was caught off balance. "I missed you terribly," I said, but I knew it sounded lame. She looked at me quizzically. "You seemed so strange when you came in tonight," she said; "you stared at me as if I had come back from the dead." I realized only then that Valentina had no idea that I had thought her dead. "I was told," I said, "that you had been killed in the fighting." She reached over and took my hand. "Poor you," she said. I did not tell her how I had so readily accepted the report as true, and (as I later came to put it) had so quickly begun to think of her as a once but lost love. She gave me an account of her disappearance.

Valentina had, she said, received news from a man who had just arrived in Haifa from Jerusalem, that one of her cousins there, a nurse, had been on a bus attacked by Arabs at Mount Scopus and was very badly wounded. She was taken to the Hadassah Hospital. The man who gave Valentina the news was returning to Jerusalem immediately, and offered her a lift. She had no time to let anyone know that she was would be away from Haifa. The journey had been difficult, and there was heavy fighting around Latrun. In Jerusalem the road between the city and the hospital was closed, and it was two days before Jewish forces opened it. Only then did Valentina reach the hospital. She found her cousin out of danger. "So now I'm back," she said, "and we can enjoy some time together."

That evening we walked to the crest of Mount Carmel, using steep and wooded pathways that cut across the motor roads winding up the hillside in extravagant bends. As the sun sank behind us, we watched Acre disappear into the darkness across the bay, and Haifa become transformed into a myriad of tiny lights. Returning to it I was once again amazed at the gaiety and indeed excitement of the people who crowded the streets and filled the bars and restaurants.... and this only two weeks before the Mandate was to end and Palestine's Arab neighbours to unleash their invasions.

376 Petrol Platoon

It could not have been long before daybreak on 2 May that I took a taxi back to Nesher Camp. I slept through breakfast and went to the Mess for coffee. Jad Mohammad Ahmad was not there. He had resigned his job with effect from the end of April, seeing quite rightly that he could have no future with an Army that was disbanding. He was, he had told us, going to Cairo. "Ask for me when you come there," he told us; "I shall be at Shepherds Hotel, and will look after you myself." This was when we first realized that the genial Jad also had a sense of humour. We composed, jointly, a glowing testimonial to his work. Webster contributed the somewhat formal, "very loyal, highly reliable, and totally honest." McClenahan was less conventional: "with Jad Mohammed Ahmed's departure," he wrote, "376 Petrol Platoon is threatened with sobriety." I rewrote that, worried lest it suggested that the departing Jad was himself a drunkard: "Jad Mohammed Ahmed shows a commendable understanding of the virtues of drinks he has never permitted himself to taste." And so we said farewell to Jad. There was, of course, no chance of replacing him since the Army's civilian employees were everywhere being laid off.

Webster prefaced lunch on 2 May with a short announcement. In a spirit of camaraderie and self-sacrifice, he informed us, he would volunteer the part-time services of his batman as new barman. McClenahan and I had reservations about this. We had become quite used to Toby's affectations, but we were not at all sure that we wanted our serious drinking to be managed by an ear-ringed, rouge-cheeked waiter albeit one in khaki. Between courses I jotted down a few lines of doggerel that I thought would amuse Webster:

*Toby or not to be? That is the question.
Batman to barman? Brilliant suggestion.
How fortunate the flunky, his life thus uplifted,
Though fearful his future if failing to function.....*

Webster broke in, as angry as I had ever seen him. "That is bloody awful," he said. I apologized, explaining that my knowledge of the old Welsh metrical forms was far from

good. "Bugger old Welsh metrical forms," he shouted; "why do you have to mock my man like this?" I realized there was a relationship between Webster and his batman that I had not previously recognized. I apologized again, saying that no insult was intended. That night two officers whom Webster had known in India joined us for dinner. They appeared not to notice Toby's unusual accoutrements, or if they did, they refrained from comment. In fact he carried out his new duties splendidly, and I soon ceased to be conscious of his eccentricities.

In late April the Platoon's circumstances were indeed strange ones. All the detachments of 83 Group, Royal Pioneer Corps, had been withdrawn from Nesher Camp, and 376 Petrol Platoon was one of only two or three (static) units remaining there. It had become non-operational other than to supply fuel to the occasional small convoy moving southwards against the general flow of Army transport. The Guards Brigade provided no security for the Platoon's tanks above Balad esh-Sheikh (though I gathered that the Haganah commander in Balad esh-Sheikh had the Nesher Guard Force keep an eye on them). One of the pressing problems was that of how to keep our own men occupied. They were understandably bothered by not knowing their pending reposting and I had described their mood to Webster as "tending towards sullen". Accordingly I should probably not have been unduly surprised when I found a note on my desk to the effect that Captain Webster had appointed Mr. Wilks to be Entertainments Officer of 376 Petrol Platoon with immediate effect. I took the risk of disturbing Webster's customary siesta. Fortunately he was not asleep.

I apologized for approaching him at such an awkward time but explained that I was feeling so upset about my lunchtime faux pas that I wanted to apologize more fully. "Think nothing more of it," Webster said. "By the way, Sir," I said, "I got your note about my becoming Entertainments Officer. He told me that he was confident I would do a good job. I explained that I did not think that keeping people amused was among the skills with which I had been blessed. He told me that he thought I had done a very good job with the Arab labourers. Modesty did not deter me from agreeing with that. He went on to point out that no accidental fires had occurred in the camp since I had done the fire-fighting course in Egypt, nor had we had a single case of malaria since.... I knew when I was defeated.

I thanked Webster for the confidence he reposed in me, and joined McClenahan for a drink. He had seen the notice of my new appointment, feigned his disappointment at being passed over, but conceded that I was by far the better man for so important a job. This gave me the idea. I had a quick word with Webster when he reappeared in his office. Had he any objection, I asked, to my adding "Chief" to my new title? He had not if I thought it sounded better. I then found the Chief Clerk and had him type two memos in several copies. The first read simply, "Mr. Wilks, Chief Entertainments Officer, 376 Petrol Platoon, appoints Mr. McClenahan to be Deputy Entertainments Officer with immediate effect." The second convened the first meeting of the Entertainments Committee for 7 a.m., 3 May, and invited O.C. Platoon to attend as an observer.

Webster was wise and excused himself from attending our meeting. McClenahan and I found ourselves in agreement that there was indeed a real problem of morale in the Platoon and felt that we should muster the men daily and assign them tasks that would still seem meaningful in the context of the evacuation. The men who worked or had worked on the installations were told to carry out all maintenance procedures and drills such that they could be operational again within an hour should policy change. The drivers and motor mechanics we more or less let loose on the junk heaps that contained the wrecks of several jeeps, 3-tonners, tanners and motorbikes, all garnished with miscellaneous bits and pieces of unidentifiable origins. I believe their only triumph was to get the engine of one derelict 3-tonner to splutter into life, but since the wheels of the vehicle were nowhere to be found it could obviously not be regarded as roadworthy. These sundry occupations could not take more than a few hours before boredom set in. We therefore decided to devote every second morning dealing with the deplorable state of Nesher Camp's perimeter fence. We devised a game of sorts that the men much enjoyed. They were divided into four teams. Each day one was designated "Attacker" and its members were taken by lorry along rough tracks in the wasteland and deposited at some point outside the perimeter. Their task was to probe the defences for weaknesses and reach the Company Office before noon. The other three teams,

"Defenders," had to patrol the Camp and intercept the intruders. McClenahan and I, mounted on our motorbikes, served as "Referees".

The Perimeter Game was enjoyed by all, but Webster became alarmed by the vigour with which it was played and especially by the violence with which those intercepted were manhandled. He summoned his Chief and Deputy Entertainments Officers to his office and told us that our concept of entertainment bore little resemblance to his. He wanted the men offered educational talks and spelling matches and that sort of thing, declined our offer of a place on the Committee, but could scarcely turn down our request that he deliver the first talk.

The First Webster Lecture, as the Entertainments Committee dubbed it, had to do with yachting on the Mersey. I doubt whether there was much enthusiasm for that particular pastime even among the dedicated Merseysiders in the audience, but Webster was applauded vigorously. He was, I reflected, undoubtedly a popular officer. McClenahan delivered the Second Webster Lecture. He spoke briefly on the situation in Northern Ireland and invited discussion. This rapidly turned into a heated argument between fans of Glasgow Rangers and those of Glasgow Celtic. Blows were exchanged before the speaker was able to restore order by thrusting fizzing bottles of beer into the hands of the fiercest of the pugilists. I gave what I thought would guarantee me a sympathetic hearing by having it announced as The Last Webster Lecture. I based it on an essay I had to write as an Officer Cadet. I entitled the talk, "Can the Army be made Democratic?" It generated very little discussion and left me suspecting that my listeners to a man knew that the answer could only be, "No bloody chance!" The Entertainments Committee withered on the vine. The NCOs and Other Ranks had their own ideas of what was entertaining. They bought much drink with their mean wage. Some gambled heavily, some were glued to their wireless sets, some took correspondence courses and some wrote lengthy letters to family and friends. Most would have described themselves as fed up rather than angry. The members of the late Entertainments Committee were confident that there would be no repeat of the Platoon armourer's fatal indulgence in Russian roulette. We spent much of our spare time at Miriam's.

Nesher

The exuberance I had remarked in Haifa was also apparent in Nesher, but at a considerably reduced level. Webster, McClenahan and I were made as usual to feel welcome. Praff told us that Radin had been transferred from command of the Nesher guard to that of a combat unit. I do not recollect the name of his successor in Nesher with whom we had an informative chat. He was, he said, responsible for Nesher, the Cement Works and the mountain road to the quarries, and – he paused and smiled – Nesher Camp. I asked him just what he proposed to do as the Mandate ended. He was very frank. He said that Nesher Camp would become part of Israel and 376 Petrol Platoon would come under the new Defence Force. He hoped, he added rather brusquely, that we would leave it in good order. It says something about the extraordinary nature of the times that Webster showed no resentment at being addressed in this manner. He gave assurances that we would indeed try to leave the camp "shipshape" (as he put it) and that we intended to disregard, as far as we could, any orders requiring us to scuttle the installations and tanks. It occurred to me that Webster was forgetting the fact that Royal Engineers would likely be dispatched to carry out demolition work.

Our friends in Nesher were amazed to learn that we had no knowledge of the schedule for our own departure, but in fact we were receiving very few communications from North Palestine District. While this was in some respects a boon, we did greatly miss the Intelligence Summaries that, for all their deficiencies, could at best provide vital information. The Platoon received the Palestine Post regularly and we came to appreciate its excellent and generally reliable reportage. Its edition for 2 May, for example, reported that the men of the Royal Marine Commandos and the King's Regiment recently landed in Haifa from Cyprus numbered about a thousand, and that a tank regiment with heavy guns had moved out of the Canal Zone and was crossing Sinai en route for Jerusalem where it would cover the final withdrawal of the British from that city.

I had thought of May Day as ushering in a brief period of quiet between the tumultuous battle for Haifa and whatever massive upheaval would follow the termination of the Mandate.

Valentina had talked of our being able to spend time together. It did not work out that way. My attempts to reach her by phone were unsuccessful as were those to speak to David. I went to her flat and found no one there, and nor were there any signs of life at David's. I had become a very erratic diarist at this time so I did not record my puzzlement and anxiety.

Irgun Zvai Leumi

At about 7 p.m. on 11 May a squadron of five or six armoured vehicles drove up to Nesher Camp's main gate. The officer in charge informed the Corporal of the Guard that he had come to obtain petrol. Understandably perplexed, the corporal phoned the Platoon officers' mess. Toby answered, told him that all the officers were at dinner, and suggested that he call Major Dewar, still listed as Officer in Charge, Nesher Camp. Unaware of Toby's unfortunate initiative, we continued eating and drinking at a leisurely pace. This in fact gave Dewar time to drive from wherever he lived to Nesher Camp. We first learned that a "situation" had developed when the Corporal of the Guard phoned again and this time spoke to Webster. The commander of the armoured cars had told Dewar that he wanted so many jerricans – I do not remember how many – to be filled with petrol and made ready for loading within an hour. Apparently Dewar pointed out that 376 Petrol Platoon was no longer in business and that it would in any case take hours to restart the installations. At this point, so the Corporal reported, the Jewish commander said that if that was so he would send his own men into the installations to get them going. Only a minute or two after the Corporal rang off there was a call from Dewar to say that Nesher Camp was under attack from Haganah.

Webster and I went immediately to the main gate. From the Corporal's account we thought it highly likely that neither Dewar nor the Jewish officer realised that the Platoon still had a large number of filled cans in its stacks. We recognized from the insignia that the armoured cars were not Haganah but IZL ones, and that Nesher Camp was not under attack but certainly in danger of becoming so. Dewar informed Webster that he intended to call Nesher Camp to arms. There was, however, a problem about this. Other than 376 Petrol Platoon there were only one or two units that remained operational in the vast area of wasteland that had once accommodated so many troops. One of these was Nesher Cold Storage Depot from which, I imagined, one could hope to muster perhaps a dozen meatpackers armed (maybe) with cleavers. There may also have been a few men left at 4 Petrol Station Company if only to stop it being looted.

No bugler was available to rally the men in stirring traditional fashion, but there was a small hand-held siren that could be induced to emit a rather piercing buzz if rotated at sufficient speed. But the situation was not really comical, for it was IZL men who had carried out the dreadful massacre at Deir Yassin. Be that as it may, some twenty to thirty men turned out and made their way to the main gate. One of our sergeants called them to order, had them do up buttons, tie shoelaces and so forth, and prepare to defend their honour. I felt quite proud of them but by no stretch of imagination could they be described as an imposing military force. The Jewish soldiers looked marginally more soldierly, not having been mustered so hurriedly. Their armoured vehicles, however, lined up outside the gate, were formidable enough but were quite apparently homemade, skilfully put together from bits and pieces of wrecks and other scrap metal. Webster remarked to Dewar that they would not be any sort of match for British Staghounds, and asked him whether he had called the 3rd Hussars for support. We assumed he had not yet done so for he bustled off towards his staff car. To our amazement ten or so minutes later the IZL cars moved off. One minute they were there, and the next minute they were rapidly passing out of sight on the main road to Jenin and who knows where? We speculated. Had the IZL unit picked up the call by Dewar's call to Brigade asking for Staghounds, and had this persuaded the officer in command not to put his weaker armour at risk?

Dewar summoned all the officers in Nesher Camp to meet at the Platoon's offices at 9 p.m. Webster, McClenahan, Wilks and four others whom we did not know, dutifully assembled. Dewar was in a rage. It seems, he said, that Guards Brigade had no armoured cars available though the 3rd Hussars were under its command. This evening's confrontation showed that Nesher Camp was indefensible. It had in fact been indefensible ever since the

withdrawal of the Arab Legion. Infantry should have been moved in to replace them. He intended to ask Brigade to send us at least a platoon. It should be stationed within Nesher Camp and under his, Dewar's, command. It was intolerable that in an emergency like this, Brigade had been unable to give any support. We later agreed that Dewar was quite impressive when aroused.

The next morning, the 12th, I went to Nesher. Praff was at work, so I saw the mukhtar. He had, of course, heard what had happened the previous evening. It had nothing to do with Haganah, he said; the Irgun was pulling all of its troops out of Haifa, and moving them to Jaffa. The men who had come to the Camp were part of this relocation. I remarked that it was not very sensible for them to have expected a British Army unit in effect to surrender, allowing them access to its petrol supplies. To understand the situation, the mukhtar said, I should take account of the facts first, that the Irgun was desperately short of fuel, and second, that its commanders were in a very ugly mood about the British. Why, I asked? IZL, the mukhtar replied, had launched an assault on Jaffa in the last week of April. Haganah had not approved it. Now the British had threatened massive intervention if IZL did not agree to a cease-fire. The fighting was stopped but the Arabs used the lull to strengthen their defensive positions.

I moved the conversation back to the events of the previous evening. Why, I asked, did the officer in command of the armoured cars not carry out his threat to enter Nesher Camp. The mukhtar said he did not know but that Haganah may have intervened because it had plans to take over the Platoon.

I reported what I had learned to Dewar. I said that it was my understanding that IZL was withdrawing all its units from North Palestine District, and that I felt sure that Nesher Camp was in no danger of further attack. "Nonsense, never trust the Jews", he responded; "we'll have to rely on the Guards Brigade." Later I saw the entry in the Brigade's "Log of Events" which had resulted from Dewar's telephone call. It was headed, "Action taken on report from OC Troops Nesher, Major Dewar," and read,

Inf 1 Gds Bde was unable to contact G I Ops or G III Ops. Passed to DO 1 Gds Bde who asked for instrs how to deal. Instructed him to consult his B.M.

In so far as I am able to unscramble this message it seems to suggest no troops were available to respond to Dewar's request for help ("G III" being perhaps the 3rd Hussars), whereupon the matter was referred to the Duty Officer, 1st Guards Brigade, who then passed it on to the Brigade Major who, so it seems, did nothing further. One may understand Dewar's anger at the lack of response while allowing that he could better have handled the situation.

Haifa

I now much regret that my diary entries for the first two weeks of May were among those to be heavily pruned within a few weeks of being written. The excised passages had much to do with my musings and misgivings about Valentina, but fortunately my recollections of the period are otherwise intact. After the encounter with IZL Webster said that he was convinced that there was no further threat to Nesher Camp and that he wanted to stay there quietly but had no objections to his subalterns spending as much time in Haifa as they wished. He made one condition however. He wanted all the Platoon's officers, as he put it, to attend "full mess dinner" on 14 May. We thought this his quirky way of referring to dinner for three. He explained himself. On that day, he said, the British High Commissioner, General Sir Alan Cunningham, would be flown from Jerusalem to Haifa where he would board HMS Euryalus. As the Mandate came to an end at midnight, the vessel would put out to sea and the British flag in Palestine would be lowered forever. In Tel Aviv the chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, David Ben Gurion, would then proclaim the existence of the State of Israel. In view of all we had been through together, Webster said, it seemed appropriate that we should be together as one world passed away and a new one was born (or words to that effect). McClenahan and I shared his sentiments.

McClenahan's visits to Haifa had been very brief ones, usually to H.Q., and he had not come to know the town well. He was accordingly pleased when I suggested that he might like to walk parts of the old Arab town with me. We had a driver drop us in Hadar Hacarmel after lunch on the 12th. Having told Valentina so much about McClenahan I had wanted her to meet him, so on the off chance that she had reappeared we went to her flat. She was there, greeted us warmly and produced beers. She had, she said, been called to Jerusalem again but was glad that she would be able to celebrate Partition Day in Haifa. I said that it would be interesting, now that the town was under Jewish control, to see some of the previously inaccessible Arab sections. Valentina saw no reason why we should not do that and volunteered to be our guide over the next two days.

I was much encouraged by Valentina's responsiveness and began once again to wonder whether we might have some manner of future together. I explained to her that we would have to return to the Platoon on the night of the 14th. Her reply came as a complete surprise. "Paddy McClenahan," she said, "will you be angry if I take Ivor away from you for Partition Day?" McClenahan realized that "Partition Day" could only mean the 15th and responded without a pause, "Only if you will promise to bring him back." I simply did not know what to say.

The 13th and 14th of May were days of the sort it was sheer joy to be alive. McClenahan and I were led by Gabriela from street to street and alley to alley. We saw bazaars where there were no Arabs left to shop and mosques where none remained to pray. But it was uplifting to see that Haifa still did have an Arab population. There were Haganah checkpoints at all the major intersections, but Arabs who had chosen to remain passed freely through them. Several times we saw Jews go out of their way to greet and shake hands with Arabs walking in Jewish neighbourhoods where a few Arabs were reopening shops. At the time, of course, we had only the vaguest idea of the magnitude of the population change, but it was being said that Haifa had lost between 80 and 90 per cent of its Arab population, the town having previously been one of about 145,000 people more or less equally divided between the two races.

The "full mess dinner" served by Toby was excellent. Webster used the occasion to announce that he had news for us. 376 Petrol Platoon was to be evacuated on the Empress of Canada which was currently somewhere in the Mediterranean. We would be disembarked at Port Said. It had not yet been decided where the Platoon would be relocated but there was a possibility that we would be moved overland by the Mackinnon Road to Kenya. As for the actual date of boarding the ship, that still depended on the availability of docking space at Haifa.

McClenahan and I thought that by and large the news was good. We were glad that 376 Petrol Platoon was to remain intact although we realized that Webster would most likely be given a home posting and replaced by a new commanding officer. We both rather welcomed the idea of serving in East Africa. I think we must have retired to our tents for a while after dinner, for I find a note in my diary penned at 9.30 p.m. "In two and a half hours," I wrote, "the Mandate ends and the Jewish State will be born." I made no comment on Webster's news, which I had yet to digest, but recorded a few recent impressions of Haifa:

There is a surprising revival of civilian life. Everyone seems extraordinarily relaxed. The bars are full, the musicians are out. But now the Egyptian Army is massed upon Palestine's southern frontier, the Arab Legion is poised across the Jordan ready for battle, and the British Army has by and large gone. I have noticed one strange phenomenon – a sudden surge of longing for the homelands, for Russia and Eastern and Central Europe. Everyone talks nostalgically about the past. It is as if the possibility of being driven out of Palestine is in people's minds, and this leads their thoughts back to Europe.

Webster had us reassemble a little before midnight. We felt that there was something we ought to do as the British Mandate ended, as the new state of Israel was born, and as the USSR became first to afford it de jure recognition. Exuberance, however, was not the stuff of

which the captain and his two subalterns were made. The great bacchanal we had promised ourselves did not materialize. We did not kiss or hug each other, nor did we dance or sing. But we did have our own modest celebration. Not surprisingly, no radio station we had tuned into, and probably not one worldwide, had mentioned the birth (at last) of the Haifa Enclave. Accordingly we thought it fitting to toast that surviving though doomed vestige of Britain's Mandate. The office of British High Commissioner had lapsed with the departure from Palestine of General Cunningham. Since General Stockwell had also left for England, we assumed that General G. H. MacMillan had taken command of British Troops in Palestine and would now become something like a high commissioner for the Haifa Enclave. "So let's drink to him as well," said Webster; "we're in his hands." And so, on that sombre note, we retired.

Partition Day

On 15 May, five Arab states sent armies across the frontiers of what had been Palestine. Almost unnoticed among such momentous events, troops from Jerusalem moving under command of the 1st Parachute Battalion were still making their way into the Haifa Enclave and adding greatly to the congestion at the Port. We knew nothing of these things when we sat down to breakfast that day. Webster said that he had woken up quite bewildered. We had toasted the Haifa Enclave and its commander but we had received no notification of where its boundaries were drawn or indeed of whether we were within them. And we still had no schedule for our evacuation. What, he asked McClenahan and me, were our reactions to the situation? I said that we had learned to live with uncertainty and that the limited information we now had still left us with major questions. I thought that we were in an intellectual predicament. We had all come to feel an attachment to a Palestine that was now being destroyed as we watched, helplessly. All three of us, I was sure, shared a certain pride in being serving officers in the British Army and we had taken our commissions seriously. I had not, however, concealed my belief that the disbanding of the 6th Airborne Division was a result of its failure as a peacekeeping force, and that this in turn was a consequence of the Labour Government's disastrous Middle East policies in general and its ambivalent attitude towards Jews and Arabs in particular.

I had arranged to meet up with Valentina around lunchtime so I did not want to prolong the discussion. I realized, however, that this was the time when I should communicate some news of my own. I told Webster and McClenahan that I had more or less decided not to make a career of the Army. I told them that I had applied for a place at university and was now awaiting a reply.

I met Valentina around noon. Notwithstanding that it was Shabat, it seemed that everyone in Haifa had taken to the streets. Spontaneously; so it seemed, people formed themselves into long processions bringing all traffic to a halt. A few of Haifa's remaining Arabs joined the celebrations. We threaded our way through the crowds, occasionally slipping into overcrowded bars to exchange pleasantries with friends of Valentina. Late in the afternoon I suggested that we seek refuge in the cool and spacious lounge of the Hotel Zion, just off Herzl Street where we could have something to eat. Once seated, I told Valentina I had news for her. The account of our conversation that I entered in my diary that night was among those parts subsequently excised, but I can recollect its course as vividly as I can that of the hauntingly beautiful ("Hungarian Gypsy"?) music played by the hotel band.

I told Valentina that we now knew that we would sail on the Empress of Canada to Port Said, and that we might then be sent to Kenya. We still did not know the date of departure but we thought it would be soon since the ship was already in the Mediterranean. I had decided that I would leave the Army and had applied for a university place in Wales. "So now I'd like to explore our options," I said, or something equally pompous. "What options," Valentina asked? I had rehearsed this. "Would you think of joining me in Wales?" I said; "we could get married." I think I was rather surprised to find that I had made my first proposal! Had Valentina anticipated it? She replied without having to think, or so it seemed. "I can't do that, Ivor," she said. "I'm an Israeli now, and I cannot leave my country."

Had I been older and wiser I might have left the matter there, switching the conversation to a different topic. I was not and did not. "Would you ever think of coming to Wales in the future?" I asked. Valentine's reply was enigmatic. "In the future I may be dead again," she said. I realized that she was referring obliquely to the report of her death at the time of the battle for Haifa, but I could not fathom quite what she meant. She saw my hesitation. "Ivor," she said, "there is something I have to confess." She told me that she had been working for Haganah for over a year. She and a number of other girls had been recruited to gather information from British officers in the security forces. They were required to identify ones who seemed sympathetic to the Jews and to put reports on them into their Haganah bosses. They were then instructed to establish friendships with selected officers and to introduce them into Haganah circles. That, Valentina said, was how she and Leila had come to be in Nesher Camp when we met at the Christmas party.

There was in fact nothing that greatly surprised me in Valentina's "confession." I would have been extremely naïve not to have guessed at her credentials. I asked her who she reported to. As I had suspected, it was David. I said that he could sometimes seem quite hostile. Was he in love with her? Was he jealous? Valentine found this very amusing. David, she assured me, was deeply devoted to his wife in Mishmar Ha'emek. He much liked talking to me but at the same time was becoming troubled by the closeness of the relationship developing between us. One of the basic rules, Valentina went on to say, was that the girls should not become emotionally involved with those they befriended. As a result she was disciplined. This was when she was sent to Jerusalem for a time and when someone – perhaps David himself – had started the rumour that she had been killed in Haifa.

Again, I should have left things there, but I persisted. "How would you feel if I stayed in Israel?" I asked; "after all, I have trained as a combat soldier." I believe that if Valentina had said that she would like that, then I would have taken an instant decision to do so. She said no such thing. "I don't want you to stay in Israel as a deserter," she replied. Something, perhaps shock, stopped me from making any rejoinder. We sat quietly for a few minutes. I did my best not to show how very upset I was. When I did finally speak it was to say something that was unnecessarily hurtful. "If you ever need a testimonial, Valentina, I shall be able to say quite honestly that you are very good at your job." These were the first unkind words I had ever spoken to her. Valentina was visibly upset. She took my hand. She was, she said, very fond of me, and I must believe that. She had not traded her affections just to obtain whatever help I might be able to give Haganah. From the first day we met, when I told her about myself, she had known that I was (as she put it) Jewish at heart. "This," she said, "is why I came to feel so close to you."

I protested. How, I asked Valentina, could our relationship be ended so abruptly as this, so casually as this, so finally as this? "The world we shared has gone," she replied, "and we have to leave it behind." I said that we could not simply wipe out all the time we had spent together. "Nothing is being wiped out," she replied; "we can still remember the time we have been together", but at the same time we must see that there can be no place for us together in the future." I was hurt, bewildered, shocked. I sensed that Valentina saw our parting as in some way having to do with the parting of Israel and Britain. But such speculation aside, the fact of the matter was that Valentina had decided that our relationship had run its course, and I could see no likelihood of changing her mind. There seemed no way forward. I kissed her

on the cheek, told her to look after herself, paid the bill, and left. The band was still playing the gypsy music.

376 Petrol Platoon

I woke up on the morning of 16 May with a quite unexpected feeling of well-being. Webster did not appear for breakfast but McClenahan was there and was obviously surprised that I was. How was Partition Day, he asked? I gave him an account of what had happened. His regrets were sincere but I found myself telling him that I felt a peculiar sense of relief. Life, I said, had suddenly become much simpler. I no longer had to grapple with problems of taking Valentina to Britain or of my remaining in Israel. I ate heartily whatever Toby had brought in from the camp's kitchen, and thought what a dependable comrade McClenahan was and what a splendid commanding officer Webster we had been and how well Toby was shaping up.... The euphoria soon gave way to boredom. McClenahan and I played a few games of chess but without much enthusiasm. We wandered round the camp and chatted with men who found it hard to believe that the date of our evacuation was still not known to us. They wondered whether the Jews were going to be driven out of Palestine. I said that was impossible because the United Nations had come out strongly in favour of Partition. Were we safe in Nesher? I said that we were because in the current circumstances no one was going to attack British forces in the Haifa Enclave. Arabs and Jews would be too busy fighting each other! I realized that I was showing far more optimism than I felt.

After lunch Webster asked me to join him for a few minutes. He told me that the previous day McClenahan had given him some account of my friendship with Valentina and had said that he was very worried about the possibility of my going absent without leave. Was that the case, Webster asked? I brought him up to date, telling him that Valentina had ended our relationship. Then there's no problem, he said. Something made me say that the two things were not connected any longer; that is, that I still had an inclination to stay in Israel, not so much to desert but simply to miss the boat when we were finally evacuated. Webster took that more seriously than I probably intended he should. "I would be very much obliged," he said in a voice that sounded like that of a Victorian solicitor, "if you would do no such thing. As your commanding officer I would probably be required to give evidence at some wretched inquiry and that might well delay my return home." What could I say? I was truly fond of the man. "I will not let you down, sir," I said. I did not.

That evening boredom lost out to melancholy. I jotted down some notes on Partition Day that I thought might help dispel my continuing bewilderment at what had occurred, but they were among the passages that came to be pruned. All that remains of the entry for 16 May is a brief expression of the deep sense of distress I felt at my country's policy towards both Jews and Arabs in Palestine:

Egyptian, Transjordan, Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese forces have invaded Palestine. Many have been trained with the assistance of British military missions, equipped with British arms and aircraft; some even have British officers and men seconded to them. Bevin's obsessive anti-Jewish policy has led to this.

I felt that the course of the fighting to come would not lend itself easily to the attention of someone far from the scene. In the middle of May, moreover, there seemed little reason to anticipate that the Israelis could match the military strength of the states combined against them. "This diary," I wrote, "ends here: I am too unsure, too confused, too depressed by all that has happened in the months here to wish to record more."

Ironically, the day after I retired as diarist was a day that called for one. On 17 May a captain of the Grenadier Guards, whose name I do not recollect, arrived at the Platoon. We were quite astonished by this, so little had any official interest in 376 Petrol Platoon been displayed in recent weeks. Our visitor confirmed that General MacMillan was indeed now General Officer Commanding the Haifa Enclave and that Brigadier G. F. Johnson of the 1st Guards Brigade was in charge of operations. I gathered that the 1st Coldstream Guards had overall responsibility for Haifa town and the 1st Grenadiers for the industrial area. It soon

became clear that our visitor was concerned with matters of petrol. There was, it seems, “something of a flap on” as the captain put it, that is, a crisis. The main Iraq Petroleum Company pipeline to Haifa had been shut down at a pumping station in Transjordan. No oil was reaching Consolidated Refineries, which had in any case been virtually closed down as the Arab exodus from Haifa had created a critical labour shortage. There were, the captain said, plans to shut down all operations over the next few weeks. To make matters worse, several oceangoing tankers had recently put into Haifa to take on large consignments of the port’s reserves of refined petrol. As a result there was, he said, “a bit of a problem” about making sure that sufficient fuel was available to complete the evacuation of Haifa Enclave. The captain came to the point. How much petrol was there in our tanks above Balad esh-Sheikh, he asked? How rapidly could 376 Petrol Platoon be made operational?

Webster said that as for the first question, we did not know but could easily find out. As for the second, it was a matter of labour. We could no longer recruit any Arab workers and we would need 50 or 60 men from the Pioneer Corps to be stationed in Nesher Camp again. The Grenadier captain asked us to go ahead immediately to check the tanks and then report to HQ Guards how much petrol remained in them. We agreed, but asked him if he knew how much longer we were likely to be in Nesher Camp. He did not. We asked him if he knew whether the Empress of Canada had yet arrived in Haifa Port. Again he said he did not know, but that he had heard a whisper that the ship had been rerouted to India. We told him we would dip the tanks that night, and he left. We compared notes in Webster’s office and decided that the Platoon’s evacuation was being delayed in case it became necessary to draw on its resources once again.

McClenahan and I decided to spend some time at Miriam’s before we went to the tanks. I telephoned Praff and asked him to join us. I particularly wanted (as so often) to consult him about the Grenadier officer’s visit and to see what he thought the Jewish reaction would be if we received orders to make the Platoon operational once again. Praff thought most of what the captain had said about the refineries was correct. Most of the older Nesher men were employed at the Cement Works but not a few of the younger people, male and female, had positions in local government and business and were well informed about such matters. They put a somewhat different interpretation on things however. They understood that General MacMillan wanted to be sure that enough petrol was available to complete the British withdrawal, but he also wanted to be sure that none was left for the Israeli troops to use. The blocking of the Iraq pipeline and the winding down of the refineries in Haifa had all been planned long ago. Petroleum would be diverted to Tripoli in Lebanon, which would take Haifa’s place as the principal oil port on the Mediterranean. I referred Praff to my second question. He had no doubt that if we restarted the installations Haganah would, quietly and courteously, step in and take control of the Platoon.

It was about midnight when McClenahan and I left Miriam’s and drove up to the tanks. It was quite unlike old times when Jews and Arabs confronted each other across the Wadi el-Tabel. No rifles were cocked and danger had gone from the scene (or so we hoped). There was more petrol in the tanks than we had expected, though our readings had to be processed before they could be expressed in gallons. We duly submitted them to Guards HQ but never heard anything further about the matter. I rather think most members of the Platoon would have welcomed the reopening of the installations if only to alleviate somewhat the depressing boredom of camp life at the time.

Haifa Enclave

The day after the Guards officer’s visit a despatch rider from Brigade delivered an envelope addressed to O/C 376 Petrol Platoon and stamped “Secret.” Awaiting Webster’s arrival we speculated that it contained either instructions to restart the installations or, better still, moving orders for the Platoon’s evacuation. It contained neither but simply notified us of the limits of Haifa Enclave. It was our understanding that the Enclave had been conceived by its very nature as contracting; that is, as units were moved into Haifa for evacuation, so the Enclave shrank – and Israel expanded. We were curious, therefore, to know how this self-destructing fragment of Empire looked in this immediate post-Mandate period. To the west

the Enclave boundary followed the sweep of the coast from to Mishmar Ha'Yam on the Bay of Acre (some 5 to 6 kms north of Haifa) to Atlit (about the same distance south of that town). Inland the boundary of the Enclave appeared to run from Mishmar Ha'Yam southeast along the line of the U.N. Partition Plan towards, but short of Afula, before swinging west from Ramat David to Atlit to include the Mount Carmel range. I attempted to plot its course on one of the Platoon's maps but not, I felt, very successfully. There were problems. The Headquarters Squadron of the 3rd Hussars had been located at Ramat David, but we understood that it had been pulled out at the end of April and was currently in a transit camp awaiting evacuation. We knew of no British unit on the Plain of Esdraelon that was still operational. We could not see, therefore, why Haifa Enclave should still extend so far inland as Ramat David. We concluded that the information sent to us was already out of date, having been drawn up perhaps two or three weeks before the end of the Mandate and taking no account therefore of the increasing momentum of the withdrawal.

It was early evening of the same day that Praff phoned Webster and said he had some interesting news to give us. Webster and I met him at Miriam's after dinner. McClenahan remained in camp as Duty Officer. Praff said that he could not tell us the source of his information other than to say that a newspaper reporter had told him it in confidence and so we should not pass it on unless it appeared in the Palestine Post or one of the other Jewish journals. On 17 May (the very day we had our Guards visitor) General MacMillan had called a meeting of senior Jewish officials from the Municipality. He announced that he was now the supreme authority within the Haifa Enclave, but that he hoped Jewish local government officials in Haifa town would cooperate with him. If they did, he would try keep out of their affairs. They could take over responsibility for railways, the airport, and such of the dock facilities that he did not need. This, Praff said, was at least reasonable, but there was more. MacMillan had gone on to declare that he would not allow any military force operating outside the Haifa Enclave – he meant, in other words, the Israeli army – to establish bases within it, and nor would the importation of military supplies through Haifa Port be permitted. This, Praff said, was outrageous. He thought that had the IZL not withdrawn its troops from the Haifa district, attacks on British personnel in the Enclave might well have been authorized.

Webster told Praff that he hoped that the reporter's information was inaccurate. I agreed, but had a strong hunch that it was not. I found myself wondering, quite idly, just what status the Haifa Enclave might have in international law. For the brief duration of its existence was it some sort of Crown Colony administered by Proconsul MacMillan, or was it a part of the State of Israel temporarily under British military occupation? Jurists in London probably did not concern themselves with any such issues since the British Government had not accepted the existence of a State of Israel.

Over the next few weeks MacMillan appears to have acted more like a Scots clan chief (which he was) than a responsible agent of the British Government. I read with amazement a report that appeared in the Palestine Post for Wednesday, 26 May:

HAIFA, Tuesday. – Haifa Port was closed today to all passenger traffic by order of the GOC, who informed the port authorities that no immigration would be permitted until the withdrawal of the British troops was completed.

I could have predicted the rider that the Palestine Post added to its news item: "In London, a Government spokesman yesterday said that no instructions had been sent to Haifa on this matter." I no longer had my contacts in Haifa, David and Valentina having gone from the scene, but to judge from the clientele of Miriam's in Nesher, good middle-of-the-road social democrats for the most part, Jewish hostility towards Britain had seldom if ever been stronger.

In Nesher Camp we no longer received regular copies of any army intelligence reports but we picked up enough gossip to know that the evacuation was proceeding apace. We heard that the 1st Parachute Battalion, the major remaining part of the 6th Airborne Division, had sailed for the United Kingdom on 18 May, and that the 3rd Hussars had left for Port Said three

days later. It was at this juncture I finally decided that I would not make my career with the army. On 20 May my mother sent a cablegram to let me know that I had been admitted to the University College of Wales at Bangor. I knew she had been enthused by the prospect of my returning to Britain, and I cannot guess how many times she had needed to forge my signature (though not my credentials) in order to speed the application through the academic authorities. I could not but accept their offer. It now became necessary for me to enlist Webster's support in applying to the War Office for transfer to a reserve that would enable me to take up studies in the coming October. Webster set about the task with enthusiasm. In the meantime, as Egyptian forces advanced into the Negev and the Arab Legion took the surrender of the Old City of Jerusalem, in Nesher Camp we still impatiently awaited a revised schedule for our departure from Palestine.

CHAPTER NINE

JUNE 1948

376 Petrol Platoon

May gave way to June. At the beginning of the month 376 Petrol Platoon could muster only 25 or so men, well below half strength. No one proceeding on leave was replaced so there was a continuous though slow decline in number. The installations remained eerily deserted. It was distressing to recollect the days when a hundred Arab workers sweated away, and took their hard won but much prized breaks, and contributed much to keeping mobile a security force that had no future. The extensive stacks of jerricans remained, creaking and groaning, and the odd one exploding, as the morning sun heated them up. They cooled, almost as noisily, as the evening sun dipped behind Mount Carmel. For want of anything better to do McClenahan and I still rode our motorbikes around the stacks after dinner. "Off on patrol again," Webster would say, sarcastically, but as it happened on the first day of June we did see, in the fast fading light, a short man in a smart suit moving along one of the furthest stacks. I fired a shot well over his head. It was the first shot I had fired in Palestine other than the one putting a horse out of its misery.

On our return to the Officers' Mess Webster enquired about the shot. I explained. Had we caught him with our motorbikes, Webster asked? I admitted the intruder had eluded us, but as Webster pointed out, we had put ourselves at a severe disadvantage by pursuing him on 'those silly machines.' McClenahan and I thought we should try to maintain at least some semblance of military preparedness. Webster seemed to find the idea quite ridiculous. In the real world, as he put it, we were now in Israel and were tolerated by the new Israeli army. Knowing that Webster had become very friendly with several members of the old Haganah Guard Force there, I suggested that he should talk matters over with them in a semi-official capacity. Webster liked the idea. He went over to Nesher the next morning, 2 June. Over lunch he gave us some account of his talks. He learned, he said, that discussions were currently in progress about what should be done with Nesher Camp. The intruder last night had probably been familiarizing himself with the layout. "I told them," Webster said, "that we would have given the man a guided tour if he'd asked."

No one that Webster talked to volunteered any information about the immediate future of the camp. The Nesher Haganah, they said, was not involved. 376 Petrol Platoon as such was no longer considered vital to Jewish defences because the battle for Haifa opened access to the large reserves of petrol in the industrial area. One man did say, Webster added, that on account of the size of Nesher Camp some army commanders wanted to develop it as a major training centre for recruits. And so, Webster concluded, the long and short of it was that we had nothing to worry about. McClenahan and I expressed agreement. Nonetheless that afternoon, when Webster was napping, we walked several sections of the perimeter fence and were dumbfounded to see the number of well-used routes through it.

Breakfast was a little late on 3 June. Webster had been closeted with the Chief Clerk for an hour or so. He was beaming when he appeared. He handed out two envelopes, one to McClenahan and one to me. I opened mine. Enclosed was a typed note that has survived the years tucked in my diary. I copy it word for word:

SUBJECT – LATE PASSES, OFFICERS

The u/m officers have been granted late passes until 0400 hrs

4 th. June 1948. These passes are granted in accordance with H.Q.

NORTH PALESTINE DISTRICT letter, reference NPD/201/G(Ops), dated 16

Apr. 48, Subject, 'Late passes for officers on special occasions', para. e.

(iv). 2/Lt. T.J.F. McClenahan, 376 Petrol Platoon, RASC.

2/Lt. I.G. Wilks, 376 Petrol Platoon,

RASC.

CAPTAIN, RASC, COMMANDER 376 PETROL PLATOON. RASC.

The pass was initialled by Waccorwqhwebster and bore the official 376 Petrol Platoon stamp and date of 3 April 1948. McClenahan and I were puzzled for we had not applied for any such passes nor had we thought that they were required to visit either the residential parts of Haifa or its shopping and business centres. We looked at Webster quizzically. "Do you accept my invitation?" he asked. He explained. We knew, he said, that our days together were now numbered. We didn't talk about it but we had worked together so well that he felt very sad that we would soon be going our different ways. He was therefore ordering us to join him in what he described as "a night on the town." We were touched by his kind gesture but were nevertheless relieved when he made it clear that he intended to foot the bill. The passes were, he told us, "my own little joke."

Webster had made a booking at the Carmelia Court in Hadar Hacarmel where we enjoyed its splendid cuisine. Then the nightclubs beckoned. We found a pleasant if somewhat seedy place nearby, and settled down. We chatted in a rather desultory fashion about the future, Webster about sailing and me about walking the Welsh mountains. McClenahan was very quiet, still thinking of staying in the army. He asked Webster if he might wander off for a time to pick up a game of darts or billiards. I was somewhat taken aback when Webster then immediately turned to me to say how very sorry he was about the relationship with my "lady friend" (as he always referred to Valentina) had ended so miserably.

I was not sorry to be able to talk about my feelings to someone willing to listen. As I remember it, I gave him a reasonably balanced account of what had happened on Partition Day. Did I think that she (my "lady friend") had loved me, Webster asked? I said that I did not know and probably never would. Did I still love her? Pride, and perhaps conceit, suggested that I reply in the negative, but honesty dictated otherwise. "Yes," I said, "I think I do." Webster's response took me utterly by surprise. "I have problems too," he said; "you know, don't you, that I am homosexual?" I did not have the slightest idea how to respond. In those days homosexuality was something that was concealed, not announced. Webster either did not notice the pause, or had the good taste not to let me see that he did. He proceeded to tell me of his love for Toby, and how the evacuation was going to tear them apart. He himself would shortly be demobilized. He would rebuild his business, and take up yachting again, but it would be impossible to have Toby, who had signed on with the Army for 21 years, join him in Birkenhead. "So you see," said Webster, "there will be something missing in life for both of us."

Over the months I and fellow subalterns in the Officers' Mess had come to see Toby less as a figure of fun and a butt for our ridicule, but rather as a somewhat sad figure to be tolerated and if necessary protected. He might be a "pansy," as we said in those unenlightened times, but he was "our pansy"! Not one of us had ever suspected that there was more to the relationship between Webster and Toby than that of officer and batman. I was quite unsure what direction the conversation should take but Webster had an agenda. "Why," he said, "do you not go and see your lady friend now, and give things one last chance." It must have been nearly midnight. "Now?" I asked. "Yes, now," Webster replied; "if she's home it might change things a bit to know that now have a university place."

Valentina

It was a walk of only a few minutes to Valentina's apartment. Perhaps, I thought, she would come to the door and say how pleased she was to see me and how much she had missed me, and that everything would be fine once again, and.... I no longer had a key to the building and had to wake up the janitor to let me in. He remembered me well. I climbed the two flights of ill-lit stairs to her apartment. The door opened before I could knock. A British captain walked out. "Hello, old boy," he said, "sorry to have kept you waiting but she's a good shag so it'll be worth it." Valentina had been at the door and had heard the

remark. She looked out. "Oh God," she said. I turned to go. "Don't," she said; "you can't leave like this."

We sat down. Valentina did the talking. She had told me, she said, about her work for Haganah, about making friends with British officers. She had known the captain for several weeks. He was from a camp near Tira. He had orders to destroy vehicles and weapons, but he was willing to arrange for Haganah to take over everything it wanted. "He wants a lot of money, which is ready for him," Valentina said, "and he insisted on having me." She knew exactly what I was thinking. She took my hand. "No," she said, "it was different with us."

I asked what she meant. "It was not like that with us, she replied, "but now you can see why I could not let you stay in Haifa with me."

I saw. For a second or two I hesitated. Again, Valentina instinctively knew that I was wondering whether there might still be a future for us. "No," she said, "please don't think about it. You must go now."

I made my way back to the nightclub. McClenahan had returned. Webster took one look at me and called for a double whiskies. I described what had happened. "I'll be damned," said Webster. "You poor sod," said McClenahan, and called for another round.

By then it has passed midnight. That was the last time I saw Valentina.

376 Petrol Platoon: finale

The conception of the Haifa Enclave was basically a simple one: it would contract automatically as troops were pulled into Haifa and evacuated by sea. Ultimately Haifa Enclave and Haifa Port would become one and the same. The problem with this scenario was that static units such as 376 Petrol Platoon and Nesher Cold Storage Depot were likely, for obvious reasons, to be left behind. Praff and his friends were constantly telling us that Nesher Camp was now officially in Israel, and that we were under the protection of the new Israeli army. They were not so much boasting about this as fussing over us. We received no regular communications from HQ 1st Guards Brigade that notified us of changes in the situation, and we decided to regard the Platoon as *de jure* part of the Haifa Enclave but *de facto* part of the new state of Israel – or perhaps the reverse?

In the absence of Army Intelligence Summaries our principal source of information was the Palestine Post. A boy on a bicycle brought three copies as soon as they arrived in Nesher, usually around lunchtime. One copy came to the Officers' Mess, one to the Sergeants', and one to the Chief Clerk for the Other Ranks. On 4 June Toby quite rightly assumed that the officers would not require breakfast but did prepare a light lunch. The conversation was subdued, devoted to a review of the night's party which, all agreed, had fallen short of being a success. No allusion was made to Webster's personal problem since McClenahan had not been present when this was divulged. The talk was of what was labelled "Wilks's shocker." Webster was very upset indeed, taking the blame for having suggested that I should go to see Valentina and apologized profusely. I was acutely embarrassed and all the more so since my efforts to play down the whole business were taken as showing admirable fortitude on my part.

I was saved by the arrival of the Palestine Post. I glanced at it and gasped. I read out the disturbing news. Two days before a refugee ship, The Endeavor, was the first to put into Haifa Port since the end of the Mandate. None of the 249 immigrants on board was allowed to land and the ship's captain was forced to put out to sea again. Once the ship lay off Ben Gurion's Israel rather than MacMillan's Haifa Enclave, of course, there was no longer anything to prevent the passengers being put ashore by tugs and lighters, but the incident fed into Jewish distrust of Britain. On 9 June the same newspaper reported that MacMillan had announced a contraction of the Haifa Enclave. Ramat David had been handed over to the Jews. We thought that this was probably a publicity stunt to placate Jewish opinion since our information was that Ramat David had not been in any real sense part of the Enclave since HQ 3rd Hussars had been withdrawn five or six weeks earlier.

I have very vague recollections of the next few weeks with no diary to call upon. I know that McClenahan and I played chess for hours on end, and that we continued to make our after-dinner rounds of the installations. We drank a lot, and all the more so when Toby

dispensed with bar bills. As we pointed out to him, whatever we did not consume would either be destroyed, which was unthinkable, or left for the Jews. Webster was beyond caring, but according to McClenahan he was still upset about the outcome of his party and was worried that I might, in his words, drink myself to death. His solicitude was touching but misplaced. I believe that he told Praff, with whom he had developed a close friendship, about my affair with Valentina and asked his advice. Be that as it may, Praff did put forward an attractive idea. He was intending to go to Jerusalem in a few days time. He had borrowed a car from the Cement Works and he was going to check on the well-being – or otherwise – of several Nesher families living there. Would Webster give me local leave to keep him company? Webster told me that he had accepted on my behalf. “Just the job for you,” he told me; “stop you brooding over your ex-lady friend.”

Praff and I left Nesher early morning on (or about) 7 June. The only practical route we could take, he said, was though Latrun which had been taken by Israelis only a week or so before. We approached that town in good time only to be stopped at a Jewish roadblock and informed that soldiers of King Abdullah’s Arab Legion presently held it. We were directed to a road under construction that was referred to as the Burma Road (for obvious reasons). It was intended to bypass Latrun to the south, but we were advised that our car might be unable to negotiate it. It was. Much of the road had recently been blasted out of the rock, and to pass along it was far beyond the capabilities of all but heavy track vehicles. We had no choice but to turn back, and by sundown Praff and I were in Miriam’s café none the worse if none the wiser for our aborted expedition.

A United Nations 28-day cease-fire came into effect at 10 a.m. on 11 June. With the exception of the Negev, Jewish forces had succeeded in holding on to most of the territory allotted them under the Partition Plan, and had overrun considerable tracts of land, particularly in western Galilee, that had been awarded the Arabs. They maintained, however, no more than a precarious foothold in Jerusalem, a city for the most part controlled by the Arab Legion. Paradoxically, although much resented by the new Israeli government, the Haifa Enclave conferred virtual immunity to Arab attack upon Haifa and allowed the Carmeli Brigade to prepare its forces for a strike against Fawzi El-Kawukji’s old stronghold, Jenin.

On 12 June one of those rare communications from HQ Guards Brigade was delivered to the Platoon. “What an unexpected surprise,” Webster said. It was. We were formally notified that 376 Petrol Platoon was no longer part of British Troops in Palestine, but had been transferred to Middle East Land Forces. That, we thought, was so devious a way of dealing with awkward static units that it would be churlish to withhold admiration. In Foreign Secretary Bevin’s statistics such units as 376 Petrol Platoon would no longer appear as being in Palestine and the withdrawal would thus look that much nearer completion. Muttering something about Alice, Webster said that the only thing to do was to beard the Guards in Wonderland. McClenahan and I thought that the decision (if not the metaphor) was a good one.

Webster found a Major at Brigade who listened to what he had to say and was able to provide some answers. First, the plan for the evacuation drawn up several months ago had required that a petrol unit be on hand until the very last stages. This was to deal with any unanticipated fuel crises that might disrupt the withdrawal. 376 Petrol Platoon had the relevant capabilities. The nonsense about coming under Middle East Land Forces should be ignored. The Platoon would continue to be under command of the 1st Guards Brigade. The general situation had now stabilized, however, and adequate supplies of petrol existed in Haifa Port and surrounds. 376 Petrol Platoon now had no vital role to play. It would be disbanded and its personnel given new postings.

We asked Webster whether he had been given any date for the Platoon to leave Nesher Camp. He had not, but the Major at Brigade had said that we should think in terms of days rather than weeks. In the event it was to be one week. On 19 June, if my memory is correct, a staff car arrived at Nesher Camp soon after sunrise. A young Lieutenant handed us movement orders from Brigade HQ. We were to leave Nesher Camp within the next twelve hours and proceed to the transit camp at Batgalim (at the northern foot of Mount Carmel). The bearer of this news took no offence at Webster’s protests, disclaiming any responsibility

for the order. He filled in the picture a little. General MacMillan was being pressed to complete the evacuation by 30 June, but was much hampered by the great number of ships waiting for space to dock.

The orders contained no instructions that we should destroy anything or that we should hand over Nesher Camp to the Jews. We explained the situation to the few Nesher elders whom we could locate at that early hour and made it known that to the best of our knowledge General MacMillan still regarded Nesher Camp as within the Haifa Enclave. They nodded wisely and said that they would keep an eye on it for us and stop looters from moving in. We instructed our men to leave everything as it was, ready for use, and within a few hours took to the road. No flag was ceremoniously lowered, no salute of guns fired. The occasion was an unexpectedly sad one.

I have only the vaguest of recollections of our journey to Batgalim. The tiny convoy was led by the Platoon's one jeep, Webster seated by the driver and the two subalterns sprawled on the luggage behind. Two 3-tonners followed, one of which had been reclaimed from the Nesher Camp junkyard by our mechanics and drivers. These carried most of the Platoon's men, their equipment, and sundry items that they had decided to appropriate as souvenirs. The three vehicles were accompanied by five or six motorbikes ridden by sergeants and corporals who ensured that our progress sounded like that of a heavy armoured column. We were surprised that we had to queue up on the public highway and wait our turn to enter the camp. Two corporals ushered us in after about half an hour. The place was packed with vehicles of all makes and purposes and I guessed that many if not most were to be destroyed rather than shipped, ours certainly belonging in that category. Webster was approached by a man who saluted, introduced himself as Company Sergeant Major so-and-so of the Coldstream Guards, and said that he had come to take charge of the Platoon. Webster asked him where in the camp his men would be quartered. "You must realize, Sir," the CSM told him, "that on arriving here 376 Petrol Platoon was disbanded with immediate effect and that all the men would receive new postings within a few days." And so we became officers without men, but not without support. Transport would arrive, we were assured, to take us to our billets. It was all quite overwhelming.

The light was fading when a car arrived. The driver spent some time finding our names on the lengthy lists he carried. He would take Captain Webster and Mr. McClenahan, he said, to their place first since it was very near, and then run me up to mine which was on Mount Carmel. It was quite a shock to realize that this was indeed a parting of ways. We asked the driver if he had any idea why we had not all been assigned to the same quarters. He said that he did not know but thought that the place near was for officers boarding ship within a day or two. We parted silently. There seemed nothing fitting to say in such circumstances.

I had no idea just where I was deposited on Mount Carmel, but could see that it was a large building that looked as if it had been taken over by the Army quite recently. I had missed dinner but a corporal offered to obtain something for me from the kitchen. I thanked him but said that I wanted only to turn in for the night. He showed me to a room, and had my luggage, one kitbag and one wooden trunk, carried in. I slept like a log.

In the morning, of 20 June I think, I made my way to the company office and introduced myself to the Officer-in-Command, a most pleasant and helpful captain. Consulting his files he was immediately able to tell me that although I was still shown as on the strength of 376 Petrol Platoon, with effect from 1 July I would be on that of 101 General Transport (Amphibian) Company, RASC, in the Canal Zone of Egypt. I remarked how odd it was that my time at the Amphibian Training Wing in Towyn, Wales, had caught up with me after ten months! Since the captain seemed happy to chat a while, I described the abrupt way in which the Petrol Platoon had been disbanded and no opportunity made for taking a proper leave of my commanding officer, Captain Webster. As he consulted his files again he told me that our reception at Batgalim probably resulted from the fact that the previous afternoon Jewish raiders had entered the camp and made off with an armoured car and several submachine guns. I was saying that the raiders were probably from the Stern Group since most Jews preferred simply to buy whatever they wanted from cooperative servicemen, when the captain broke in. He could find no reference to a Captain Webster but there was a Major Webster.

“A. J. Webster,” I asked? It was. I was delighted to know that his majority had been restored. He was listed as en route for the United Kingdom but no ship was named. Apparently one seldom knew more than a day or two in advance which vessel to board, such was the crush on docking.

I traded on the transit camp officer’s good nature by asking if he could trace a 2/Lt. McClenahan. He could not, but thought the name might have been mistyped and he pointed to a M. Callahan due also to sail to the U.K. I asked if the files had any information on the fate of the members of the disbanded Petrol Platoon. His office dealt only with the movement of officers, he said, but he knew that a Bulk Petrol Transport Company was in transit at Batgalim and so it was possible that the Petrol Platoon had been absorbed into it. I thanked him for his help, and asked him one final question. Did he know how long it would be before I sailed? He did not. “It was like a game of poker, out there in the Port,” he said.

I read a lot over the next few days. I took a taxi down to the Port, hoping that the bookshop might by some miracle still be open. It was not. I made a few enquiries about Tewfik but found no one who knew him. It was 23 June and the Palestine Post contained a news item that I found somewhat ironical. The future of British military properties in the former mandated territory had become the subject of negotiations between the United Nations Mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte, and the British military authorities. I have a clipping from the paper before me:

The Mediator informed the U.N. that his deputies had been forced to intervene to prevent a clash last week between British and Israel troops over the disposition of the Haifa camps being evacuated by the British.

Count Bernadotte said that he had decided that the only way to dispel the continuing friction was to have the U.N. take over responsibility for the camps during the present cease-fire period. Under the agreement, the Israel authorities would be called upon to guarantee that their troops would not try to use these facilities during the life of the truce.

My thoughts went to Nesher Camp and I wondered whether any notice whatsoever would be taken of Bernadotte’s decision should agreement be reached on its role in the defence of Israel.

Here were 20 or so officers waiting their movement orders and we shared a mess. There was a great deal of banter at the table, one or two of the more senior men obviously trying to embarrass the more junior. “How did you find the Arab bints,” one of them asked me? I should have said, “Wonderful,” or something to that effect. I said that I had a Jewish girl friend. “Was she rich,” asked one? “Are you going to take her to England,” asked another? I had no time to give my answer any thought. “No,” I answered; “she died in the battle for Haifa.” The conversation changed. That evening I took out my diary and decided that my encounters with Valentina on Partition Day and at Webster’s party were too painful to live with. I carefully excised from the diary all references to her that post-dated the misreport of her death in April. I came in time to find it easier to live with that romantic fiction rather than with the unhappy truth.

I did not receive my movement order until the morning of 28 June. I was to board the S. S. Samaria for Port Said the next day, between 2 and 3 p.m. Transport would be provided.

Departure

I was driven to the relevant dock at about 3 p.m. It was packed with vehicles. Long queues of men with kitbags shuffled towards one or other of the gangways. So far as I could make any sense of the situation, it seemed that security in the Port as such was in the hands of several companies of the 1st Guards Brigade and the Royal Marine Commandos. Those who had boarded before me clustered on the deck, sharing bits of information they had picked up. One official announcement had been made on the Samaria’s address system. The Tactical HQ of the Guards Brigade would shortly be coming on board but the boat would not put to

sea until the next day when the whole Brigade had joined it. One rumour had it that three British tanks had disappeared during the night, and that General MacMillan was demanding that they be found before the evacuation could proceed. A succession of explosions echoed in the hills and fed the story. Since the UN cease-fire still held we knew that no battle between Arabs and Jews was likely to be in progress, but had the wisdom to conclude that what we were hearing was the last minute destruction of British military vehicles and supplies for which no shipping space was available. Someone reported hearing that about 5,000 soldiers had to be moved in these last two days of the withdrawal. There was no sign of any lull. Nine or ten ships lay in the harbour without docking space, but a busy flow of lighters moved men and materials out to them.

An announcement came over the public address system that all officers on board were invited to the Captain's Table and that the Adjutant of the 1st Guards Brigade would preside over dinner. The Adjutant greeted those arriving. He shook hands with some and nodded to others. I received my nod, but it was accompanied by, "Mr. Williams." I said, "Wilks, Sir." "Nesher Camp," he barked. Then I remembered that he was the very man who had evacuated our labourers from the Petrol Platoon installations in April. Was I to apologize for failing to recognize him? Before I could do anything he murmured something about being pleased to see that I now had a supply of razor blades, and smiled as I was ushered on.

I suppose there must have been 40 or 50 officers at the Captain's Table. The Adjutant opened the proceedings by announcing that all drinks were on the Brigade. He was quite embarrassed, he said, by the amount of alcohol they had brought on board. "But we're not going to leave it behind, are we?" (cheers). "And we're certainly not going to take it all to Egypt, are we?" (louder cheers). "I want this night to be one that you'll never forget, but I know that for some of you it's going to be one you'll never remember (groans). The Captain of the Samaria made a brief speech. This was his third trip on the evacuation, he said (applause). He had taken the Engineers and Artillery to Blighty – Britain – in March (applause). He had taken HQ 6th Airborne Division there in April (applause). And now he was going to make his final trip to get us out of the way (loud cheers). But they don't want all you lot in Blighty (groans). So he'd been told to drop us off in Egypt (loud groans). Decorous toasts were then made to the King and other dignitaries, and a boisterous one to "The Bloody Shambles We Are Leaving Behind." After dinner we settled down to some serious drinking on the deck as the ship rocked gently in the swell. To one side were the lights of the Port and Haifa, and to the other those of Acre across the bay. There was an overpowering sense of camaraderie among the passengers. We were, after all, among the very last to leave this particular piece of Empire. The occasion had something of the character of a rite de passage. Nothing would be quite the same for many of us ever again. As the level of inebriation rose, some became nostalgic for the country they were leaving and others began to anticipate places they had never visited before.

Few of us had more than an hour or two's sleep before we were woken by the noise of further troops boarding the ship. It was still dark, but as dawn broke Haifa briefly took on a rare beauty, even the most austere concrete office blocks having their moments of glory. The earliest to board turned out to be 2nd Company, Coldstream Guards, followed by 2nd Company, Grenadier Guards by a different gangway. I then enjoyed a good breakfast and returned to watch the proceedings. Several tanks were being manoeuvred through lower hatchways and then all gangways were pulled up. As tugs edged us slowly away from the jetty we had, as it were, a birds'-eye view of the Haifa Enclave in the last few minutes of its existence. The Union Jack still flew over a short stretch of quay where H.M.S. Striker was docked. A company of the 42nd Marine Commandos boarded it. A second, of the 40th, remained ashore. The Samaria began to swing in the tide and we lost site of the Striker.

It was late morning when the Samaria's public address system summoned all personnel to assemble on deck in uniform. The ship's engines were stopped. The national anthem was played, and an army chaplain offered prayers the incomprehensibility of which was guaranteed by the appalling quality of the loudspeakers. No official explanation of the episode was given, but we assumed that it indicated that General MacMillan had presided over the lowering of the flag in Haifa Port and had then, with the remaining men of 40th

Marine Commando, boarded the Striker to convey them to some larger vessel lying in international waters. We had, we thought, taken our part in acknowledging that Haifa's Enclave was now a once but past one. By early afternoon the heights of Mount Carmel were no more than a smudge on the horizon. I felt a sense of profound loneliness. I thought of David and Dan Laner, Haganah officers, socialists and zionists; of labour organizer Mohammed and law student Tewfik, both communists; of Naftali Praff, social democrat and ex-British Army driver; of Jad Mohammed who made the Officers' Mess so congenial; of Webster and McClenahan, the former a sympathetic commanding officer and the latter a splendid fellow subaltern; and, of course, Valentina. I loved them all in one way or another, but they were once and past loves. I never again saw any one of them after leaving Haifa.

POSTSCRIPT

ISRAEL REVISITED, 1989

Nesher and Tel Hanan

The Nesher Cement Works still belched vast quantities of dust into the air, and our rented car was transformed from black to off-white within the hour. In the old village that I had known so well, some of the wooden houses built by the first settlers still stood, but many had been abandoned and were presently no more than heaps of weed-covered rubble. A new Nesher – Givat Nesher – had taken shape above it, on the lowest slopes of Mount Carmel. As for Balad esh-Sheikh, it had become a thriving Jewish appendage of Nesher. None of its Arabs ever returned, but the more substantial of their houses were still standing and occupied. Today it is no longer known by its Arab name. It is now Tel Hanan. On the wall of a house near the Municipal Council Office in Givat Nesher there was (and presumably still is) a plaque in Hebrew reading, in translation, “In this place in 1948 Hanan Zelinger from Kibbutz Yagur and Chaim Ben Dor from Jerusalem were killed. They fell in an action of retaliation because Jews were murdered.” The reference is to the Haganah attack on Balad esh-Sheikh in the early hours of 1 January 1948. A few feet from the plaque an old red British post-box kept it company in the same wall.

We were joined in Nesher by Zafra Lerman, an associate of the Max Planck Institute in Haifa and, more to the point, a niece of the Miriam whose bar and café I had so often frequented in 1947-48. There was, Zafra told us, a Haganah Museum in Givat Nesher which she wanted to visit with us. It was her understanding that the key was in possession of the Mayor (who would have been the mukhtar in earlier times). This dignitary, however, informed her that the museum was only opened once a year on Independence Day, and that in any case he did not know where the key was. Zafra took this as a gross insult to the founders of Israel. There was a blazing row in Hebrew and Yiddish, of which she later gave us a summary. I would remember, she said, how proud Nesher had been of its all but total support for Ben Gurion and the social democrats. This had been swept away by newcomers after 1948 who gave their support to rightwing candidates. “I told the Mayor,” Zafra said, “that my father would have turned in his grave at what had happened.” The key was found.

The principal room of the building turned out to be a memorial to Nesher’s Haganah Guard Force. There was a small collection of its weapons: stens (or uzis), grenades and so forth and, the pièce de resistance, a homemade mortar (davidka). Four large photographs of members of the unit were displayed: Wachsmann (upper right), Feldinger (upper left), Gurnitski (lower left), and Radin (lower right), identified as four machers (“big names”). Feldinger and Radin appear in the Memoir. Zafra’s brother, Yitzak Jacobi, who fought in Haifa with the 22nd Battalion of the Carmeli Brigade, knew both. Radin, he said, died six or seven years ago. He had been in the Jewish Settlement Police and then joined the Nesher Guard Force. He became its commander. Later he was transferred to one of the brigades and rose to be colonel. Feldinger – “Willie” Feldinger, Jacobi said – was in the British Army until 1946. He came home to a job in the Cement Works and joined the same Guard Force unit. He too was now dead. In another room that appeared to be a later addition there were some 30 or so photographs that commemorated all the men and women of Nesher who had died since 1948 as a result of any manner of Arab action.

Zafra had us visit her elderly aunt, Miriam Goldberg, who was then living in Haifa. She and I were much touched, neither of us having expected ever to meet again, but our efforts to recapture old times proved absurdly difficult. She remembered vividly a number of men from 376 Petrol Platoon. She, however, knew them only by their forenames and I by their surnames, so our nostalgic ventures into the past were utterly jeopardized by old social conventions. This was not so with David Schvit, another member of the Nesher Guard Force. Zafra brought me to his attention. I did not know him but he knew me, but two encounters with are report in the Memoir.

Tuvia Lyshanski

I was curious to know the fate of Nesher Camp after its evacuation by the British in 1948, and Miriam Goldberg had remembered a Major Tuvia Lyshanski being there. He had, it turned out, retired as General and was living in Natzrat Ilit, a Jewish settlement that sprawled over the hillside above Arab Nazareth. On the lower slopes were row upon row of huge and austere apartment buildings of recent construction. Higher, these gave way to older and more decorous buildings, each accommodating a few families. Finally, on the crest of the ridge, lay the oldest houses, one-family dwellings with beautiful, well-tended gardens. Lyshanski and his wife lived in one of these.

In 1948, Lyshanski been commissioned to raise a special force for service in upper Galilee, patrolling Israel's frontiers with Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. It was to be recruited from those he described as "the minorities," that is, Druze, Bedouin, Circassians and even Christian Arabs. Nesher Camp was to serve as its headquarters, and he took command there just a few weeks after we had evacuated it. I asked him if he had volunteered to train the minorities. He spoke Arabic, he replied, and he was a good horseman. His wife urged him to tell us about his father. "That is old history," he said; "and you won't be interested in that." We assured him that we would be.

In another day and age when Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire, Lyshanski's father, Josef, was a member of the Jewish underground group NILI (Netzah Israel Lo Ieshaker), and had spied for the British against the Turks. He was captured in 1917 and hanged in Damascus. Josef's wife, Rivka, was also taken prisoner but spared because she had two young children. He, Tuvia Lyshanski, was one of them. His wife wanted to be sure that we understood the point of the story. The Jews, she said, could have ransomed Josef but failed to do so. As a result her husband, Tuvia, grew up "somewhat as an outcast." He rode with the Bedouin and spoke perfect Arabic, and so was the ideal man to direct the special force in Nesher Camp.

I asked Lyshanski if he thought we might be allowed into Nesher Camp. He was not sure, but gave us something that he thought might help. It was a photograph that he endorsed in Hebrew, "'Dedicated to Ivor and Nancy Wilks. A party of Druze soldiers in Nesher Camp, 1948. Tuvia Lyshanski, commander of the minority groups."

Nesher Camp

The main gate to Nesher Camp was where it had always been, and so was the guardroom. I asked if we might go in, explaining that I had been posted there in 1947-48. The guard on duty understandably looked perplexed. After some humming and hawing, he sent a soldier off on an old bicycle to seek guidance in this unusual situation. About five to ten minutes later a major appeared. He, too, was unsure what to do. I showed him the photograph that General Lyshanski had given me. It appeared to confuse rather than clarify the situation. "Do you have any identification?" he asked. I did. Tucked in my wallet were an Illinois Driving License and a Northwestern University Faculty Card. I said that I knew these were not quite what he wanted, and apologized. I think that the major realized that not even the most cunning and crafty spy could have thought up such unlikely pieces of identification. A captain was detailed to escort us round the camp.

I noticed immediately that the hundreds of whitewashed jerricans that in old times had been used, half buried, to mark out the roads and pathways, and of which we had been quite ridiculously proud, had now been dispensed with. Gone, too, was the large concrete cistern that had once served as an equine crematorium. Otherwise many of 376 Petrol Platoon's buildings survived. Its Officers' Mess was there but had been demoted to General Canteen. I glanced inside. All had changed. I tried but failed to visualize where the bar had been at which Webster, McClenahan and I had talked and joked and grumbled late into many a night.

A truck arrived in the camp while we were there. Soldiers of the Jewish Defence Force in full camouflage, faces still blackened, began to unload heavy weaponry much of which I could no longer identify. The men, we were told, had been in action in Lebanon, having taken part in the abduction of the Arab notable, Sheikh Obeid, three days before. I thought

back to the days when the Platoon's armoury contained nothing heavier than Bren guns and 3-inch mortars. I commented on this to the captain escorting us. "That was a very long time ago," he said. I asked him if he or anyone in the camp might remember British troops being there. "None of us was even born then," he replied.

I realized that the Israel I had known and loved and left in 1948 could never be revisited.

APPENDIX I: PHOTOGRAPHS



376 Petrol Platoon, 2/Lts McClenahan (right) and Wilks, Christmas Day 1947



376 Petrol Platoon, Arab labourers (from top left clockwise): Mahmud Mohammed Sulamih (Syria), Jasser Khalid El-Hamadi (Syria), Mohamed Shabaib Enaimy (Syria), Hussain Hamed Mahmoud (Palestine), Ali Ahmed Haj Tahir (Palestine), Salih Abid Aiyidi (Palestine), Ali Ahmed Mahmud Al-Shihadi.

Name <u>JAD. MOHAMMED AHMED</u> Contractor (If applicable) Nationality <u>EGYPTIAN</u> Employing Unit <u>4 PETROL STN. COY.</u> <u>R.A.S.C.</u> Nature of Employment <u>WAITER</u> Date of Birth <u>1893</u> Height <u>5'6"</u> Colour of Eyes <u>BROWN</u> Colour of Hair <u>GREY</u> Special Marks Civil Identity Card on Passport No. <u>51894</u>	43292 PHOTOGRAPH OF HOLDER and STAMP OF ISSUING OFFICE  Date of Issue <u>15.5.47</u> Signature of holder <u>[Signature]</u>	THREE MONTHLY RENEWALS Unless renewed, this pass expires on <table border="1"> <tr> <th>Date of Expiry</th> <th>Signature of Unit Security Officer and Office Stamp</th> </tr> <tr> <td>3 JUN 1947</td> <td>Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3 SEP 1947</td> <td>Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3 DEC 1947</td> <td>Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.</td> </tr> </table>	Date of Expiry	Signature of Unit Security Officer and Office Stamp	3 JUN 1947	Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.	3 SEP 1947	Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.	3 DEC 1947	Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.
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Jad Mohammed Ahmed, "Butler" to officers of 376 Petrol Platoon.

RENEWALS (Continued) Unless renewed, this pass expires on: <table border="1"> <tr> <th>Date of Expiry</th> <th>Signature of Unit Security Officer and Office Stamp</th> </tr> <tr> <td>3 FEB 1948</td> <td>Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3 MAY 1948</td> <td>Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.</td> </tr> </table>	Date of Expiry	Signature of Unit Security Officer and Office Stamp	3 FEB 1948	Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.	3 MAY 1948	Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.	CONDITIONS OF ISSUE <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This pass is only valid for the purpose for which it is issued. 2. It may be renewed only by the Security Officer of the employing Unit. 3. It must be carried on the person and produced on demand. 4. On termination of the employment for which it has been issued it must be surrendered. 5. The loss of the pass must be reported to the Office of Issue. 6. Misuse of this pass renders the offender liable to dismissal from employment with H.M. Forces. 	IDENTIFICATION PASS BRITISH TROOPS IN PALESTINE AND TRANSJORDAN This Pass entitles the holder to enter ON DUTY ONLY <u>4 PETROL STATION COY.</u> <u>R.A.S.C.</u> Pass No. <u>43292</u> Permit Officer <u>[Signature]</u>
Date of Expiry	Signature of Unit Security Officer and Office Stamp							
3 FEB 1948	Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.							
3 MAY 1948	Major, <u>[Signature]</u> Comd. 4 Petrol Station Coy. R.A.S.C.							



6 Petrol Platoon, Nesher II Installations; Balad esh-Sheikh in background



Mahdi Bey, 26 February 1948



Nesher Cement Works



Fawzi el-Kawukji, Commander of the Arab Liberation Army

(23) 87
NOT TO 35 DIX-H
SIS

COMBINED VETTING AND APPLICATION FORM

for all W.D. Civilian employees, contractors, voluntary Workers, technical advisers, and permanent visitors.

A. To be completed in respect of all applicants.

1. Full Name <u>HAHO HAHG HAHAGH</u> <small>(Mr, Mrs, Miss)</small>		S.I.S. Use only	
2. Father's Name <u>HAHO HAHAGH</u> <small>(If dead, state when and to what body name last.)</small>		Particulars checked	Date
3. Present Address <u>HAHO HAHAGH 1000 DIX-H</u> <small>(If other, give full P.O. Box address, including telephone.)</small>		Record Checked	
4. Previous Address <u>SYRIA</u>		Type & Size of Pass Issued	
5. Religion <u>Moslem</u>		Date of Issue	
6. Date of Birth <u>1723</u>			
7. Nationality <u>SYR</u>		8. Former Nationality <u>SYR</u>	
9. Mother's Nationality <u>SYR</u>		9. Father's Nationality <u>SYR</u>	
10. Date of arrival in Palestine <u>1747</u>			

12. Particulars of:

(1) Number <u>47417</u>	Civil Identity Card	Passport
(2) Date of Issue <u>1.1.48</u>		
(3) Place of Issue <u>HAHO</u>		

13. Employment or Nature of Business GHAFIR
(Secretary, Foreman, etc.)

14. Employing Unit or firm 376 PISTON PLANTERS

15. Place FEHER II

16. Previous Employer ---

17. Date of Discharge ---

18. Height 5' 6"

19. Colour of eyes BROWN

20. Colour of hair BLACK

21. Moustache/Beard/Clean shaven CLEAN SHAVEN

22. Distinguishing Marks NIL

23. Physical peculiarities ---

24. Married or Single SINGLE

25. Wife's Maiden Name ---
(Husband's Full Name)

B. To be completed in respect of Contractors & their employees.

26. Name of contractor ---

27. Business Address ---

28. Name of Unit to which accredited ---

C. To be completed in respect of Welfare workers

29. Stamp of Welfare Organisation --- Signature ---
(Secretary of Welfare Organisation)

CERTIFICATE

(a) I understand that, if an Identification Pass is granted, it will be on the strict conditions that:

(i) It will be only used by myself;

(ii) It will be used only to visit the Camps and Establishments specified, and for the purposes stated in this application;

(b) I undertake to observe the above conditions and to return the Identification Pass at any time on demand, or when no longer required.

Date --- Signature of applicant ---

CERTIFIED that to the best of my knowledge, the Applicant is a fit and proper person to hold an Identification Pass.

Signature of O.C. Unit --- Date ---

Office Stamp ---

No Pass will be issued unless holder is in possession of civil identity card or passport.

4861 PP & T/P/447

Application for ghaffir, later rejected



Squadron of 3rd Hussars crossing Wadi Rushmiyya Bridge, 22 March 1948 (courtesy Gale & Polden, Aldershot)



Haifa from Mt. Carmel



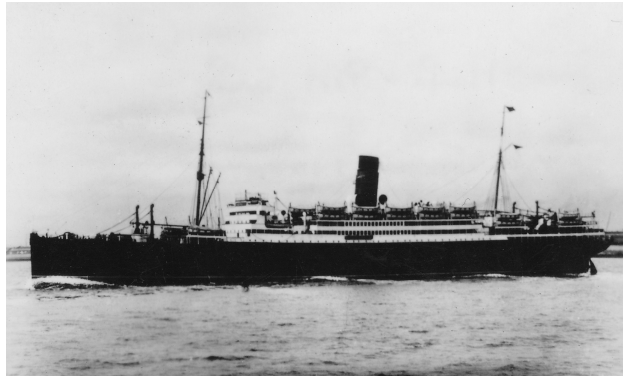
Partition Day, Haifa 15 May 1948



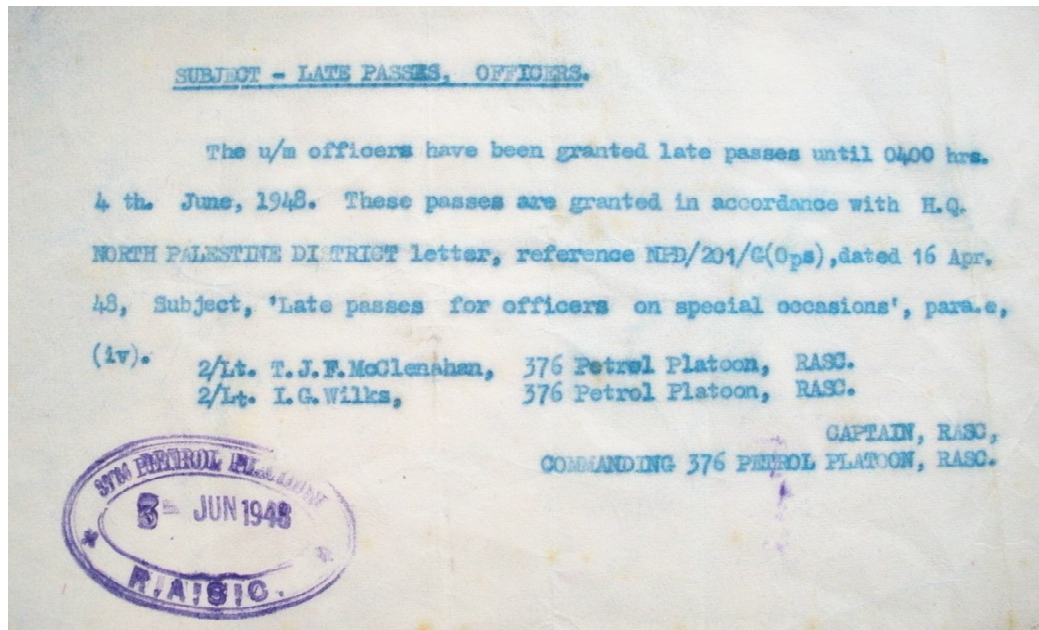
Haifa, Hertzl Street 1948



The Arab Legion dinner, Nesher Camp 19 April 1948



S.S. Samaria, troopship, docking Haifa Port 29 June 1948



The Webster Pass, 4 June 1948



Arab Legion "Guard of Honour" Nazareth



Nesher Camp, Druze soldiers of the Israeli Special Force under Tuvia Lyshanski, August 1948

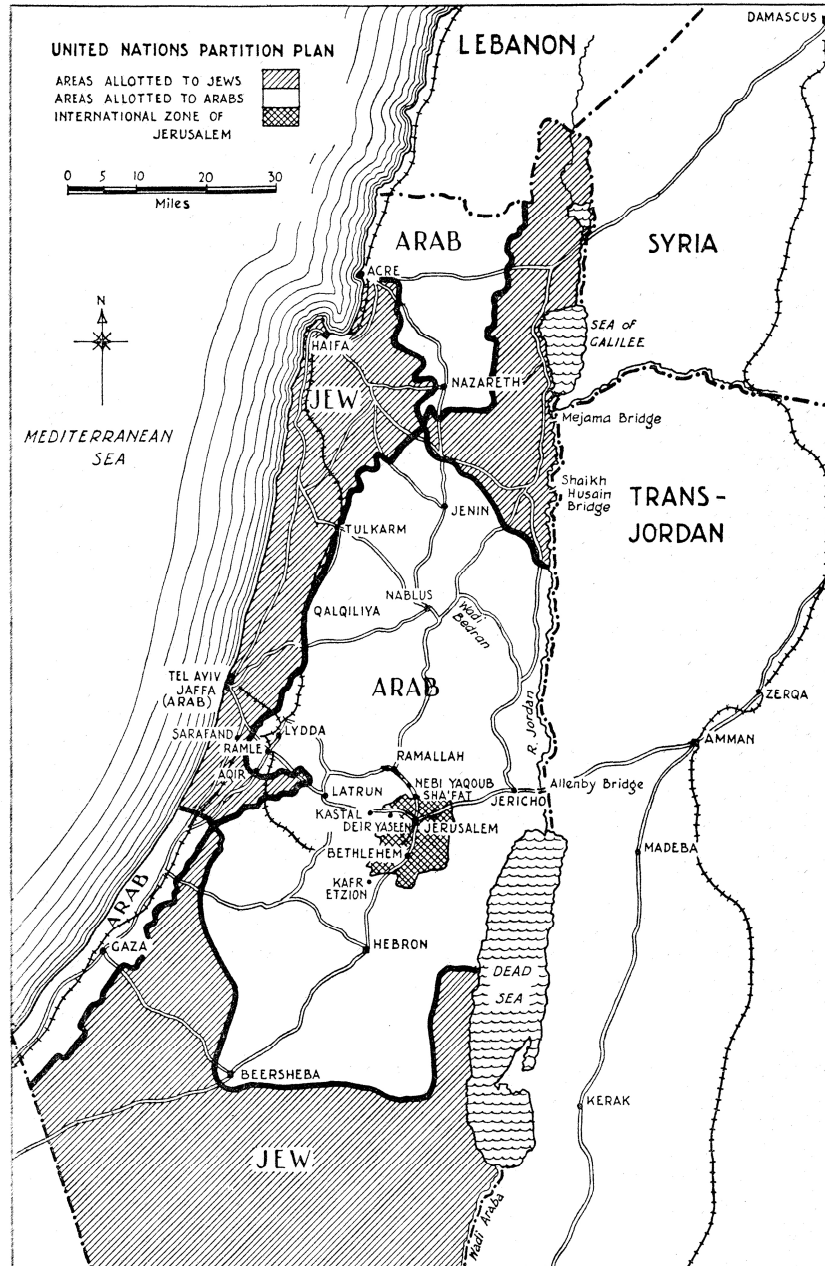


Evacuation of Arab labourers and families from 376 Petrol Platoon, 24 April 1948 (1)

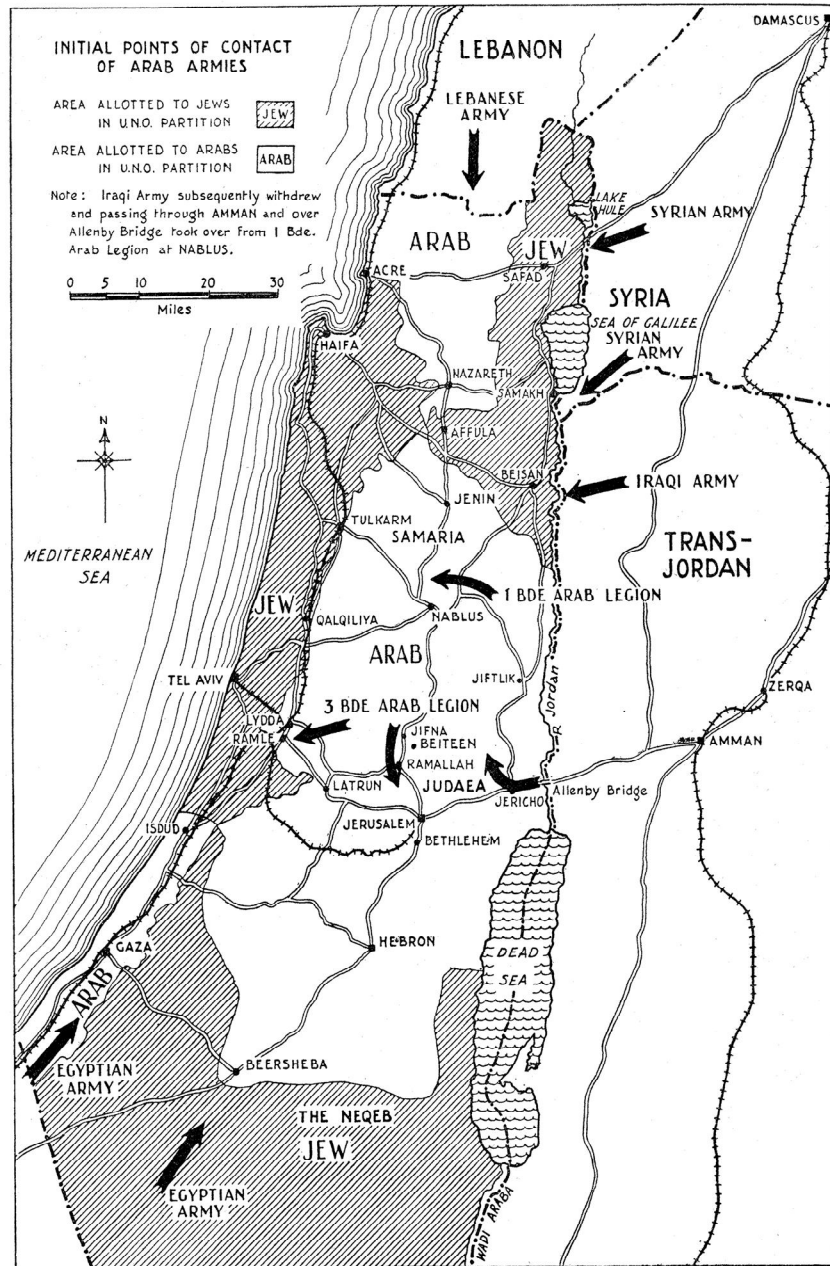


Evacuation of Arab labourers and families from 376 Petrol Platoon, 24 April 1948 (2)

MAPS



United Nations Partition Plan



Positions of Arab Armies Invading Israel May 1948

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