AMATEUR PALESTINIAN GUERRILLA

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During the second World War, for most of us, periods in contact with the real enemy were punctuated by periods, often much longer periods, during which we had to contend with that enemy of so many soldiers, boredom. In the Middle East Command these periods were often spent in Palestine, Syria or the Lebanon. Training had to be carried on, but it must have been a dull-witted commanding officer who could not relieve the boredom and repetitions inevitable in military training when stationed in such interesting countries. Enjoyable excursions could easily be disguised as training if the use of transport and petrol had to be justified. Exercises in map-reading and road navigation took me and my unit to some wonderful places. On one occasion a pleasant excursion was disguised as a ‘Schistosomiasis Survey’. After a lecture about the manner in which this tiresome complaint (know to soldiers as ‘Bill Harris’ from its alternative name of Bilharziasis) is transmitted, the soldiers wandered off happily in search of specimens of the freshwater snails in which the parasite spends one phase of its life-cycle. Pictures had been exhibited on a blackboard, which we had brought with us, in an adaption of Pooh Bah’s expression—“to lend an air of versimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing claim to be really training”. I cannot now remember if a single soldier presented me with a single specimen of Bulinus or Planorbis, but an enjoyable time was had by all. From Aleppo some wonderfully varied country could be explored, though going westwards it was annoying to have to stop just short of Antioch, to avoid internment in benevolent neutral Turkey. We visited the most stupendous of all Crusader fortresses, the Krak des Chevaliers; and the excavations at the supposed site of the pillar on which St Simeon Stylites had squatted for many years in what he conceived to be the odour of sanctity, and no doubt of much else besides.*

*There were in fact two such saints. St Simeon Stylites the elder, 390-459, chained himself to the three foot wide top of his pillar and remained there for the last 37 years of his life. St Simeon Stylites, the younger, 521-597, took up pillar-squatting as a boy and kept it up for 69 years, until his death; but he did change pillars. His last, on the Wonderful Mountain near Antioch, was his home for 45 years. (The Book of Saints. Pp. 646-647).

Our officers’ mess at Aleppo was frequently visited by an elderly Armenian patriarch; a splendid figure in his stove-pipe hat, black robes and scarlet stockings, carrying a huge silver-mounted staff. He would harangue me at great length about the sufferings of his people, but my vague impression that he hoped that I could, in some way, ‘take up the white man’s burden’ on their behalf, was quelled by more worldly-wise brother officers. Even patriarchs are human and he really came for the food and drink, and for the ration of cigarettes with which he always departed.

My unit, 166 Light Field Ambulance, whilst in Aleppo had two roles. We ran a small hospital for the various troops in and around the town, including a Greek brigade. My second-in-command was the supreme authority in this sphere. Dr
Morgan Evans, once again as before the war, a well-known hunting general practitioner in Wiltshire, saw the funny side of everything — including me. Although a Welshman he was not too easily roused to wrath, which was as well when a chaplain chose to open a service in his ward with the hymn, “Brief Life is here our portion”. We thought we had solved the language problems with our Greek patients when a member of that brigade who spoke perfect English was sent to me for interview. “You’ll do splendidly”, I cried. “I’m afraid not Sir” he said sadly — “You see I can’t speak any Greek”. He was a native of Alexandria and had never been in Greece.

Our primary role, for we were a field medical unit, was to train with the brigade of which we were part, the famous 9th Armoured Brigade, familiar to any student of the Battle of Alamein, as the armoured brigade incorporated in the 2nd New Zealand Division. When General Montgomery told our general before the last major engagement of that battle that he was prepared to accept 100 per cent casualties in 9th Armoured Brigade in order to gain his objective he had chosen his sacrificial lamb wisely. The armoured regiments, the 3rd Hussars, Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry and Warwickshire Yeomanry, were a regular cavalry regiment and some of the cream of the English yeomanry; bristling with fox-hunting and rugger-playing men, with a liberal sprinkling of masters of foxhounds. The motto displayed on the panels of the Wiltshire Yeomanry commanding officer’s car is a proud one — ‘Primus in Armis’; but any Desert Rat will appreciate the humour of the Warwickshire COs driver, who asked if he might paint on his car ‘Primus in boot’. His CO, Guy Jackson, was destined to lose both legs later on in Italy, which, according to C E Lucas-Phillips “he treated with the utmost casualness... and after the war rode again to hounds”. (Alamein. C E Lucas-Phillips, p. 346).

In the two phases of the battle of Alamein. ‘Operation Lightfoot’ (the assault on the Mitreiya Ridge) and ‘Operation Supercharge’ (the great tank fight of Tel el Aqqaqir) the brigade actually sustained over 100 per cent casualties. These casualties were of course in tanks not human lives, though these too had to be sacrificed. This explains “well over 100 per cent”, since tanks knocked out in the first engagement were recovered and repaired, only to be knocked out again in the second. But the battle reduced our brigade to a mere composite squadron of seventeen tanks, and it sadly withdrew to lick its wounds in Egypt, Palestine and Syria. If any member of that fine brigade should chance to read this article they may like to know that ‘Monty’ did not forget. Many years later when I met him at the final jamboree in Perth of the disbanding 51 (Highland) Division, he asked me his customary question: “Who were you with in my army?” when I had replied “The 9th Armoured Brigade, Sir”, he said with great emphasis — “The 9th Armoured Brigade at Alamein enabled me to win the battle — to win the battle!”

By 1943, at my fairly low level, an impression was gaining ground that the brigade would shortly become involved in warfare in mountainous country —? the Caucasus. Anyway the brigade commander seemed set on finding out if tanks could climb around in mountains and rocky defiles. Brigade exercises took us from Aleppo to the Euphrates, the ancient ruined city of Palmyra in its lovely oasis, and Damascus.

The merest whisper of mountain warfare had aroused what to many mem-
bers of my unit were my worst instincts. I had always been fond of hill walking. Training an Indian field ambulance for the invasion of Eritrea I had marched them across the deserts of the Sudan and up any available mountains. The value of this had been proved at Keren, where the physical fitness of my bearer companies led us to being called upon to help in the battles of the other two brigades as well as our own. In Egypt our famous divisional commander, Bernard Freyberg, VC, had said more than once that the only proper way for a soldier to be made fit was by being made to march. This suited me fine; but in the period before Alamein I think a few members of my unit missed me greatly when I contrived to worm my way into the Middle East Ski School at the Cedars of Lebanon, as a somewhat bogus extra instructor. Their feelings on the subject were neatly summarised in a telegram sent by the officers much later, when in 1944 I had left the Middle East to join in the invasion of Normandy; but only after taking time off to get married. Their wedding telegram read: “We hope your wife likes walking”.

Before Alamein my unit had been stationed near Rehovoth, in the Southern part of Palestine, with its orange groves and Jewish settlements. Riding round the cities of the Plain, on some of the fine horses brought to the Middle East by the Yeomanry, the tribes which sound so imposing in the Bible, shrank to impoverished Arab inhabitants of dusty villages surrounded by cactus hedges. Many of the Jews whom we met here, and later in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Nathanya or Haifa were refugees from Nazi Germany. The liking which I had conceived for young Germans during pre-war ski-ing holidays (Natural Allies. Blackwoods Magazine July 1975) was readily extended to these sturdy future citizens of the state of Israel. Some of the talents which they had brought to their new homeland were demonstrated at memorable concerts given by the Palestine Symphony Orchestra. A particularly unforgettable experience was hearing Beethoven’s 8th Symphony (“My little symphony” as he called it) by moonlight in some ruins near Jerusalem.

After Alamein we lived in a more predominantly Arab part of the country. We were camped in and around the Austrian Hospice on a hillside above the town of Nazareth. Here, on many a trek through the hills of Galilee, I met Palestinian Arabs and enjoyed an occasional cup of coffee with the headman of small hill villages. They were charming. It seemed to me at the time that the further one travelled Eastwards or Westwards from Cairo so did the likeability of the local Arabs increase. In retrospect one can sympathise with the Egyptians; their country taken over as a vast military base for a war in which their sympathies were dubious; their king virtually a prisoner in his own palace. But to the British soldier they presented a hand permanently outstretched for ‘Baksheesh’, usually accompanied by a wailing request for ‘Mungariya’ — something to eat, though they did not appear to be starving. It was all too easy to understand Winston Churchill’s verdict on the Egyptian army during the Sudan campaign: “They came; they saw; they ran away. Some less speedy than the rest, fell upon the field of honour”.

Incidentally some members of our Corps had reason to credit King Farouk with a considerable sense of humour and an ability to see the funny side of the irrepressible British soldier. After he was seriously injured in a car crash he was taken to a British military hospital. In reply to a question about his passengers, the ambulance orderly shouted “Only a couple of fat Wogs”. In due course, as his
condition improved, the royal patient displayed a measure of impatience if the British concept of proper meal-times did not quite match up with those observed in the Abdin Palace. On one such occasion a nursing orderly is said to have bellowed down the corridor: “Get a move on Bill! Farouk wants ‘is mungariya.” The king is said to have been delighted and clearly not annoyed for he expressed the hope that this young orderly should get one of the medals which he dished out to the staff.

During the war, perhaps because of the presence of so many British troops, the bitter struggle between Jews and Arabs for the possession of Palestine was in suspension. The idea of taking sides never entered my mind. Friends in that splendid body of men, the Palestine Police, were not lulled into any feeling of permanent peace. As soon as the war was over, they assured us, their lives would be Hell. Then they would be glad of what occasional protection they could get from their miniature fortresses. It was said that, when these Police Posts were built, an economically-minded Government had used old plans for fortresses on the North West Frontier of India, to save architects' fees. More than one policeman added that when the trouble started up again, “that chap Wingate” would be in the thick of it, probably leading the Haganah. Orde Wingate had, in fact, offered to dedicate his life to the Zionist cause; and, during his pre-war service in Palestine had given the Jews much advice about the formation of the Haganah, the famous Zionist military organisation. During the war many members of the Haganah served our cause, either as members of British units, or in purely Jewish units in the British Army.

We could march or motor fearlessly through places destined to become notorious trouble spots. On one march an obviously spent bullet whinged over my head and buried itself in the hillside. No doubt everyone else felt sure it had whinged over his head; but I am sure it was not meant for us. Gradually our range was extended from short hikes through the hills to Ca'na; further on to the horns of Hattin, where Saladin conquered the Crusaders; then further still, in a two-day march, the Mediterranean coast at Acre. One of these marches, which even I had to admit had its wearisome moments, took us across an upland plain to the striking cone of Mount Tabor, up which we toiled to be rewarded by a fine view over the great Plain of Esdraelon with the hills of Samaria beyond it. The custodian of the shrine on top of the hill claimed it as the site of the Transfiguration; but on the whole a more likely spot seems to be the snowy heights of Mount Hermon, which we failed to visit. On the return route from Mount Tabor, whilst sweatily ascending a rocky defile, we were not far from Endor. If its famous witch had still been in business I think that several stragglers would have gladly contributed to a whip-round to get her to bewitch me into cutting out the walks and concentrating on the swimming parades. Those much more enjoyable jaunts included the Sea of Galilee, the Mediterranean and an attractive outdoor pool near Acre. They were also valuable training, for it surprised me to find how many young men in those days had never learned to swim.

I do not think that many members of the unit showed much enthusiasm for visits to the traditional places of pilgrimage in the Holy Land. Their attitude was rather that of the legendary soldier who wrote home: “Dear Mother, I am now
in Palestine, where Christ was born; and I wish to Christ that I was in Wigan where I was born”. I do not think they missed much. Many pilgrims have written of the vulgar commercialism of the various sites; the squabbles between opposing sects over ownership of the sites and the arguments about which are really the genuine sites. People who live among hills tend to follow certain paths and tracks through their hills, which are unvarying through the centuries. Tramping the hills around Nazareth we must, in H V Morton’s expression often have walked ‘in the steps of the Master’.

Our last camp, before my return to the United Kingdom, was near Tripoli, the Syrian oil port. The foothills of the Lebanon were splendid for walking and climbing. We sometimes passed two rather off-white stone lions guarding the entrance to the Garden of Eden, of which the true site is Ehden in the Lebanon, according to the Maronite Christians. They also believe that it was in the Anti Lebanon that Cain murdered Abel. John Green devoted nine chapters of his book ‘A Journey from Aleppo to Damascus’ (1976) to these interesting people.

Six members of my unit were attached to the nearby ski school to learn to ski and to provide medical assistance to the ski-troops, which we still thought we might need, if Hitler and his Were Wolves retreated into the mountains of Festung Europa. These six were Corporal Hubert Murphy (Belfast), Privates Christopher Preston (Liverpool), Percy Miles (Surrey), Alex Shaw (Surrey), Fred Reading (Stockport) and Theodore Stephenson (Ambleside). They have never ceased to be grateful to the Army for their chance to enjoy the wonders of ski-ing in the great basin of the Lebanon range; as I know from those whom I have subsequently met. One of them, Fred Reading, who writes to me regularly, was one of those invaluable men who keep everyone cheerful when the going is hard. Appropriately, his peacetime hobby is playing in and producing local pantomime.

My familiarity with the hills of Galilee made me the obvious choice for the role of ‘chief enemy’, when the brigadier decided to find out if the march of an armoured column through hilly country could be seriously hampered by the activities of partisans or guerrillas. The answer proved to be that it could—and was.

‘For the purpose of the exercise’, as they say, I became Abu Rejard, ‘The Scourge of Galilee’. As I obviously could not live on the country and compel Arab villages to feed me and my small band of desperados, we were allotted a ‘safe area’ in the hills, within the circuit which the Brigade column was to traverse in a four day march. Rations were delivered to my safe area, in which was parked my station wagon with a wireless set on which I could receive exercise messages ‘in clear’ — I was not supposed to listen in to the Brigade wireless set, on which, in any case, all messages were in ‘slidex’, to which I was denied the key — even amateur guerrillas cannot be relied upon to play fair.

I entrusted the opening shot of my campaign of harassment to one of my most expert young mountaineers, Private Stephenson, trained in the hills of Cumberland, and possessing the agility and off-hand unobtrusive cunning of a cat. This opening shot was the chucking into the Brigadier’s caravan of a stone with an attached message, signed in blood — well, red ink really — “Learn, presumptuous
Brigadier, that there is no soft under-belly in Galilee” sgd Abu Rejard.

As might be expected in close hilly country the Brigade's route offered many opportunities for well-placed road-blocks, at which our use of thunder-flashes enabled us to score a few 'casualties' and to impose considerable delays. But we had our best fun when the column camped for the night in an upland plain quite close to some rocky hills in which we lurked waiting for nightfall. Creeping in gym-shoes down a difficult rocky nullah we penetrated the camp and 'murdered' several soldiers — by slipping bits of paper under the mosquito nets within which they were fast asleep. They awoke next morning to find that they had been stabbed during the night. But I don't think that we managed to disable any tanks. Eventually, so that the exercise might end, as all good exercises should, in time for tea on the last day, a parley had to be arranged. The Brigade Major came to my camp and, as we chatted by the side of my station-wagon, he rested his Sten gun against the side of the vehicle whilst he lit a cigarette. An unobtrusive gesture was enough to send Private Stephenson wriggling under the car to make off with the weapon. Of course it had to be returned, though I did point out that the area was only officially 'safe' for me; but the loss of an officer's personal weapon in wartime is too serious an affair for joking.

Our activities led to no ill-will, unlike those of real-life terrorists, Any sympathy for the Palestinian Arabs' desire to regain their homeland tends to be extinguished by the terrible deeds done in pursuit of it. I was never stationed in Palestine before the war and do not know where lay the sympathies of the average British soldier when they were actively engaged in helping the Palestine Police to keep order. Many were hit by Arab bullets; and I was told by members of one Highland regiment that a convenient target was the prominent posteriors of kilted soldiers as they clambered into the back of their lorries, Officers too managed to get shot in the bottom, and I learned that on mess-nights, if veterans of Palestine tended to 'shoot a line' about their warlike adventures, a cry of 'Wounds' was raised, whereupon their brother officers would seize them and expose their honourable scars.

Alas, many Palestinians who had soldiered by our side and trained under our leaders as well as under their own until Hitler was defeated, became our enemies once that common aim had been achieved. Immediately after the war the Jewish Agency, as the shadow government of Palestine, demanded a hundred thousand immigration certificates and the great tides of legal and illegal immigrants began to roll in. If the British soldier felt initial sympathy for the Jews, who had suffered so terribly in Europe, his sympathy was to be severely strained. Terrorist activities, which to their perpetrators were legitimate acts of war, nonetheless involved many ruthless, and often cowardly and treacherous murders. Seven soldiers of the Parachute Regiment were the victims of one massacre; and among the kidnappings was the horrid one which culminated in the hanging of two innocent British sergeants. One of the bodies hanging in an olive grove was booby-trapped. No doubt the best of the Zionist leaders deplored the dark deeds of the Stern gang and the Irgun Zwai Leumi; just as local Church leaders profess to do about similar conduct in Ulster today. As always, the loser is the British Soldier, holding the ring between contestants for whose causes he often has no strong personal feelings.
I am not sufficiently well-informed to be able to suggest which side has most cause to disapprove of our country's role in the prolonged conflict. I suspect that it may be the Arabs, and that we muddled our way with benevolent intent into the 'Promised Land' business through the vague influence of the Old Testament. If my brief spells in the Holy Land brought to life some parts of the New Testament they certainly cut down parts of the Old Testament to the dimensions of the chronicles of some very unimportant small tribes and the petty quarrels, as I have already hinted. Just as I now realise that the battles of the Scottish Covenanters, in which my ancestor Roland Richardson took part, were pretty small beer, so do the Old Testament battles shrink when one visits the places where they were fought. Armageddon may not, after all, be too bad if there is to be room for it in and around Megiddo and the Plain of Esdraelon.

Whilst General Moshe Dayan was an enterprising military leader he became my favourite television star. The unshaven ferocious appearance of Yasser Arafat and the foul outrages which he must try to justify, combine to show the Palestinian Arabs in a poor light in contrast with the smooth, cultured, well-groomed spokesman for Israel, including the soldierly figure of the military spokesman General Chaim Herzog, who could fit so smoothly into any background of retired military 'top-brass' in Camberley, Fleet and parts adjacent. Yet they now enshrine as national heroes the cold-blooded assassins of Lord Moyne (It is high time I 'piped down', leaving this sort of thing to abler and less excitable commentators).

I am thankful to have enjoyed some happy escapes from war into those beautiful countries; their hills and plains often glowing with 'the lilies of the field' —poppies and wild cyclamen. Happy days when offensive conduct by amateur guerrillas involved no bloodshed and no rancour. What never? Well hardly ever.
Amateur Palestinian Guerrilla

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