

CAPTURE AND RELEASE OF TWO AIRMEN IN KURDISTAN IN 1926.

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ON June 14, 1926, during some operations in Southern Kurdistan against the notorious rebel, Sheikh Mahmud, a D.H.9A aeroplane, pilot F/O F. M. Denny, passenger A.C.1. Hirst, was forced to land behind the enemy's lines on the Penjwin plain. The other machine on the reconnaissance flew round and round for a considerable time in the hope that F/O Denny would be able to get away again. However, it was not to be, and the pilot was obliged to return to his base at Kirkuk and report the misfortune. No sooner had the machine disappeared from view, than the Kurds galloped up to the wrecked aeroplane and took the pilot and mechanic prisoners. They were taken to Penjwin, where Sheikh Mahmud had his headquarters. There they remained till night, when they were sent off to a village called Walajir, about fifteen miles inside Persian territory.

On the following morning a letter was received from F/O Denny by the Officer Commanding troops, saying that he and Hirst were Sheikh Mahmud's prisoners and were being well treated. He also said in the letter that Sheikh Mahmud wanted to open negotiations with the Government on the basis of his appointment as "King of Kurdistan" in exchange for the prisoners. Thus we were left speculating as to their fate, and the general impression was that they would be well cared for, but no one could quite see how their release was to be obtained.

From time to time letters were received from F/O Denny saying that both prisoners were well and asking for various things, like clothes, books, etc.

On September 13, a letter was received from Sheikh Mahmud saying that the prisoners were ill and asking for medicine for them. As the letter gave no clue to their ailments, I sent a small parcel of some dressings and a few drugs, such as quinine, calomel, Dover's powder, magnesium sulphate, etc., with written instructions as to how to use them.

At the same time a letter was sent to Sheikh Mahmud asking him if he would guarantee safe conduct to a British doctor to visit the airmen.

On September 16 a large column, which I accompanied, moved out from Sulaimania to occupy the Penjwin plain, the object being to prevent Sheikh Mahmud from taxing the Jaf nomad tribes, who were just then on their annual migration down from Persia to spend the winter in Iraq.

On September 20 a letter was received from Sheikh Mahmud to the effect that he would give a British doctor safe conduct to visit the prisoners.

By this time the column had reached the Penjwin plain, so that, luckily for me, I was the nearest doctor available.

The Air Vice-Marshal Commanding in Iraq wirelessly from Baghdad that, if willing, I could go. Accordingly, I packed a pannier full of drugs and dressings and some medical comforts and waited till the arrangements for my journey were completed.

On the morning of September 24 I left the camp on horseback at 8.30 o'clock, my kit and the pannier being carried on a mule, and my servant bearing a large white flag.

We halted about one and a half miles out, as it was arranged that we should there be met by a party of Sheikh Mahmud's men, also bearing a white flag. They were some time in plucking up courage to come out, as the Kurd is naturally treacherous and suspects everyone else of the same fault. After waiting about twenty minutes, six very wild-looking men, armed to the teeth, galloped out from behind the hills and saluted. Through the medium of my servant they explained that they were my escort, and that they had received instructions to do everything I wished.

Thus, we started off on our twenty-mile journey, two of the escort galloping from side to side across us as we went. This, they explained, was their usual custom and was intended to show their joy at my coming to visit their Sheikh. After going about half a mile, we passed through a gap in the hills where they had their picquets.

Every pathway was guarded by armed sentries, who challenged us as we came along. They were all mounted on small Kurdish ponies, and armed with either British or Turkish rifles, and literally covered with ammunition.

About two miles beyond the picquet line we came to a very large tree, underneath which were seated two men drinking tea. Here we halted and dismounted, and the shorter of the two stepped forward and, saluting smartly, introduced himself as Majid Effendi, the commander-in-chief of Sheikh Mahmud's forces. He was a good-looking, dapper little man, about five feet six inches in height, and had been a Turkish officer during the war, both in Gallipoli and Palestine. The taller man turned out to be Sabir Beg. I had heard a great deal about him, as in 1922 he and his father had murdered two British officers in cold blood. He was a very sly-looking person, with a close-cropped beard, and I should say it would be impossible for him to look anyone straight in the face.

Majid told me there were two roads to Walajir, one a very bad road through the hills, the other a good one along the plain, but longer. I chose the latter, and we set off straightway, accompanied by Majid and Sabir. A mile further on we passed their rations going up to the picquets. They were being carried on three mules, driven by a small boy, accompanied by two armed men.

Just inside the Persian boundary we came to a village called Bashmak, Majid's headquarters. The whole village, including the women, turned out to see us. We halted here for a couple of hours, while we had some tea

and the horses were watered and fed. While there, Majid sent a mounted man back to the Officer Commanding the column, saying that I was in Bashmak, and that I was well and had everything I wanted, which indeed was quite true, as they looked after me exceedingly well throughout.

About midday we left Bashmak, this time accompanied by Sabir and six horsemen only, Majid explaining to me that he had to stay behind to direct operations, but that he hoped to see me again, and that Sabir would look after me well. We had been riding along for about half an hour when we came across a perfect network of well-dug trenches. They proved to be Russian, constructed during the war by a small column which had penetrated down there in 1917. Near here we passed large flocks of sheep and goats being driven along in the direction we were going. Sabir told me these were the taxes which the Jaf tribes had paid to Sheikh Mahmud, and that they were being sent to Walajir. Later I learnt that the Jaf had always paid taxes to the Sheikh of their own free will, as they regarded him as a very holy man.

About 1.30 p.m. we halted at the village of Pir Mustapha for lunch. The village was a nice one, with rose trees and poplars growing all around it, and large vineyards on the hillside behind. It was owned by Mahmud Khan, of Meriwan, who was very hospitable and gave us a very good tiffin, consisting of hard-boiled eggs, roast mutton, bread, and fruit, with any amount of sour milk to drink.

We resumed our journey about 3 p.m., the road now taking us beside Meriwan lake, a most beautiful piece of inland water, roughly eight miles long and four miles broad. In winter it is completely frozen over and must be ideal for skating. I was told it was full of very big fish.

Soon after passing the lake we saw about a hundred horsemen approaching. They proved to be a party sent by Sheikh Mahmud to welcome me. His brother-in-law, eldest and youngest sons, and Denny and Hirst were in the party. Although I knew the latter quite well, I did not recognize them for a moment, as they had both got very thin and were, moreover, dressed in Kurdish clothes. I was glad to hear from them that they had practically recovered from a severe chill, which they caught bathing in an icy pool. After much hand-shaking and saluting, we continued our journey, and immediately half a dozen of the party gave the customary display of horsemanship by galloping from side to side in front of us.

It amused me when I saw that the gallop was led by Sabir. I rode beside Denny for the rest of the journey and he seemed to be in very good spirits, in spite of his trying experiences. He told me that they had been well treated on the whole, and that Sheikh Mahmud gave them everything they asked for in reason.

We arrived at Walajir, a very poor village with only one decent house in it, at about 5 p.m. At the entrance to the village was a guard of honour of ten men under an officer. They were drawn up in single rank and presented arms in British fashion. Having inspected them I was brought

to a small reception bower which had been specially prepared for me. The floor was covered with very nice Persian rugs and cushions to sit upon. Here I was met by Sheikh Mahmud, who expressed great delight at my visit, and said he hoped I had been well looked after on the journey. We sat down and drank many cups of tea, while the Sheikh protested his loyalty to the British Government, and at the same time made it quite clear that he did not think much of the Arabs, nor of the Iraq Government. I listened, but made no comment.

Although a special room had been prepared for me I decided to stay with Denny and Hirst for the night, as I wanted to see the conditions under which they were forced to live. Pleading fatigue from the journey, I retired there very soon.

They lived in a small house consisting of two rooms, one of which they shared with the captain of the guard and the sentry on duty, the other being occupied by the remainder of the guard. There was an open entrance and three windows without any glass in them, so that it was bitterly cold at night, Walajir being about 4,500 feet above sea level. Denny and Hirst slept on the floor with the captain of the guard beside them. They had Kurdish mattresses and blankets, which Sheikh Mahmud had given them. One miserably small lamp lighted the room at night.

I must confess I did not sleep much and was truly thankful when it was time to get up next morning. I noticed that the sentry on duty was very wide awake all night.

The first thing I did in the morning was to examine Denny and Hirst thoroughly. The guards were looking on all the time, and I knew they would be certain to tell Sheikh Mahmud everything. I found that Denny was anæmic, dreadfully thin and simply eaten alive by fleas and lice. He seemed to be "scratching" all day and night. Hirst was in the same state.

After breakfast we walked about for an hour in the sun, and at 10 o'clock I went in to Sheikh Mahmud's house to have a talk with him. The conversation was carried on through the medium of two interpreters who spoke very little and very bad English, and I regret to say we did not make much progress. Sheikh Mahmud opened the conversation by asking me if the Government had given me any powers to negotiate with him for the release of the prisoners. I replied that I had received no such instructions, that I was merely a doctor sent by the British Government to attend to the health of the prisoners, and that I wished to do what I could for them. He replied that he had always been the friend of the British Government, and that he would do anything in his power to please them. To this I replied that his best policy was to release the prisoners forthwith, as I felt sure the Government would have nothing to do with him as long as he kept the airmen prisoners. We argued for about two hours and eventually, about midday, we broke up the meeting and went outside to have some photographs taken. At 1 p.m. we had lunch together, Sheikh Mahmud inviting Denny and Hirst to partake of the meal with us.

Immediately after lunch we commenced arguing again, so I asked Denny and Hirst to go out. Fortunately, by this time, Majid Effendi had arrived, and I soon discovered that he spoke French fluently, and that he could understand my very poor efforts at that language. We were now able to dispense with the interpreters, and immediately made much more progress. Majid was a very enlightened man, and it was easy to explain to him that a great nation like Britain, which had endured the loss of hundreds of thousands of men taken prisoners during the war, was not going to change its policy to obtain the release of two, and that it was to Sheikh Mahmud's advantage to return them unconditionally.

I pointed out that the prisoners were not accustomed to living under such conditions as his detention of them entailed, and that the imprisonment was having a serious effect upon their health. I added that I feared very much for their lives, were they to be kept in Walajir during the coming winter. I impressed upon him that the winter would shortly set in and that it would then be impossible for me or any other British doctor to come to their aid. Finally, I told him that, in my opinion, the British Government would never pardon him if anything were to happen to the prisoners, and that until he released them the Government would not even reply to any of his letters.

We broke up the meeting about 4 p.m. and I went to have tea with the Turkish doctor who was there. His name was Orhan and he had been in a hospital in Constantinople during our occupation. He inquired for some three or four officers in the R.A.M.C. whom he said he had known there. Before I left he insisted on my taking as a souvenir a small bottle of "reargon," a preparation made in Czecho-Slovakia for gonorrhœa; I have not tried it.

He displayed a fair knowledge of medicine and asked me awkward questions about the health of the prisoners. I tried to persuade him that they were very ill, but I do not think he believed me.

After tea Denny and I strolled about, Hirst, not feeling strong enough, lay down to rest. Denny told me all about their life with Sheikh Mahmud, who was evidently anxious to treat them well, doubtless with the idea of getting into favour with the Government once more. At one time he offered to provide them with wives, and at another he offered to pay all expenses if Denny's father would come out from England on a visit. Needless to say, neither offer was accepted.

While we were walking about, one of the interpreters came and asked us if we would like to see their ammunition supply. Naturally, we said "Yes," and were shown two Hotchkiss guns, one Vickers gun and one German machine gun, together with about 20,000 rounds of ammunition, mostly British, with some Turkish and Russian as well. The guns were all fired in turn, and they informed me that 10,000 rounds were being sent up to the picquets that night. All this was done with the object of creating a big impression on me. It did not.

At 7 p.m. we all sat down to dinner, Sheikh Mahmud, Said Ahmed, his brother-in-law, Majid Effendi, Denny, Hirst and myself. It was a very pleasant meal and everyone was very cheerful, Denny and Hirst each having a small bottle of champagne which I had brought as "medical comforts."

After dinner Sheikh Mahmud intimated that he would like to continue our conversations, so I asked Denny and Hirst to go out. We argued for hours, going over the same old ground again and again. Eventually, about midnight, Sheikh Mahmud said that they would discuss the matter between themselves and give me their final word in the morning.

I retired to bed, but did not sleep very much. I arose early in the morning, anxious to learn if my arguments had persuaded Sheikh Mahmud to return the prisoners. At 8.30 he sent for me and told me that he promised to send them back, after an interval of ten days and before fifteen days had elapsed. He explained that he specially desired this interval as he wished to return them voluntarily and not as though he was acting under pressure from the Government, as any indication of weakness in this respect would considerably affect his prestige with his followers and the local tribes. I asked him to call Denny in and repeat his promise. He did this and at the same time Denny undertook not to talk about it.

At 9.30 I said good-bye to Sheikh Mahmud, Denny and Hirst, and rode away, accompanied by Majid and half a dozen horsemen. We followed the same road as we had come by, and once more had a pleasant meal with Mahmud Khan at Pir Mustapha. During the ride I had a long and interesting conversation with Majid, and found him most interesting, able to discuss a variety of subjects and holding broad views on most. It seems a pity that he could not make better use of his life, but he appeared to be quite happy. When we arrived at Bashmak we halted, and a letter was sent on by horseman to the Column Commander saying that I would arrive at camp about 5 p.m., accompanied by Majid. We halted for about an hour, and I confess I dropped off to sleep as I was exceedingly tired.

We commenced the final stage of the journey at 3 p.m. and reached the picquet line without incident. Here, however, was drawn up another guard of honour, this time of an officer and fifty horsemen. They looked very business-like, and as we rode on they gave a wild shout and galloped off into the hills. As we approached camp I could see the Column Commander coming out to meet us. When half a mile away we left the escort behind, and Majid and I approached alone. In accordance with Kurdish custom, he took off his revolver and handed it to me. I did not accept it, saying that I would be responsible that he did not use it. He delivered a letter from Sheikh Mahmud to the Column Commander, saying that the prisoners would be released after an interval of ten days and asking where they were to be sent.

As the Column Commander could not say definitely, it was arranged to meet again the following morning at the same place. That night a wireless

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message was sent to the A.V.M. in Baghdad giving him full details and asking him to nominate a place. He chose Khurmal, where there was a British officer. The following morning we went out and gave this message to Majid, who promised that it should be carried out.

As the object of the column had been defeated by the Jaf voluntarily paying taxes to Sheikh Mahmud, we marched back towards Sulaimania the following day, arriving there three days later. Contrary to expectations, but to everyone's great delight, Denny and Hirst were delivered over safely at Khurmal on October 9.