

Reprint **Island Tides**

Visit www.islandtides.com for more interesting articles on other BC, national & international topics

Reprint from Volume 15 Number 20

Oct 9—Oct 22, 2003

Black Gold—a Series About Oil

Blood For Oil—a long history ~ Peter D. Carter

A little history may cast some light on the eagerness of the US and UK to invade Iraq earlier this year. And, in particular, why the staunch Blair support for Bush's war.

Baghdad and Basra are familiar names to the British army. While governments come and go, the army stays on. The United Kingdom is still a monarchy and the memories of Her Majesty's armed forces go back a long way.

In the so-called 'Great War' of 1914-1918, the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire sided with the Germans and Austrians. Since 1534 the Turks had held Mesopotamia, the 'Land Between the Rivers,' Tigris and Euphrates (including present-day Iraq), and they had a firm grip on many of the Persian and Arabian oil fields. Britain wanted that oil for its large navy, with which the British Empire ruled the waves.

But in the first years of the war the Ottomans defeated the British everywhere. In 1916, beaten down by flies and mosquitoes and hampered by swamps, 13,000 diseased and demoralized British and Indian soldiers surrendered to Turkish troops.

At Kut-al-Amara (Al-Kut), halfway to Baghdad, the Turks annihilated the 6th Indian Division. Then they gutted three more British divisions that tried to drive up the Tigris River. These humiliations made the Mesopotamian war a matter of honour for some of the British generals.

'Johnny Turk' had to go, no matter what.

A new British commander-in-chief, Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Stanley Maude, was brought in, charged with changing the Mesopotamian scene from despair to victory.

The British army had been, since November 1914, in possession of Basra, in the south of Iraq, and held its oil wells. They had also occupied the terminal of the oil pipeline and the refineries on the island of Abadan on the Shatt El Arab waterway, in the southwestern corner of Persia (Iran).

In December 1916, Maude ordered a swift offensive from Basra. British troops crossed the river Tigris, defeated the Turks who had entrenched themselves along the shores, recaptured Kut-El-Amara and went on to Baghdad, Beersheba, Jaffa, Jerusalem.

Karabekir, the Turkish commander of Baghdad, was indecisive, which allowed the 50,000 British troops to advance

close to Baghdad without suffering heavy losses. Karabekir's mistakes made the defence of Baghdad almost impossible and the Turks ordered a general retreat. More than 12,000 Turkish troops fled. By the time the British entered the city, on March 11, there were only 9,000 Turkish soldiers remaining. They surrendered rather than fight. British troops entered Baghdad on March 12, 1917.

Here is the Proclamation to the People of the Wilayat of Baghdad, which General Maude issued when he took the city: 'People of Baghdad, remember for 26 generations you have suffered under strange tyrants who have ever endeavoured to set one Arab house against another in order that they might profit by your dissensions. This policy is abhorrent to Great Britain and her Allies for there can be neither peace nor prosperity where there is enmity or misgovernment. Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators.'

Britain had ensured its oil supply for the Royal Navy, which found a base in Kuwait's excellent natural harbour. (Kuwait-British relations dated back to a treaty signed in 1899.)

The defeat of the Turks meant the end of the Ottoman Empire. World War I divided the 'Near East' among the victors, with the new League of Nations giving Britain a mandate to run Iraq (as well as Trans-Jordan, Palestine and Egypt). The French, who had some claim on northern Iraq, were promised a quarter of any future Iraqi oil revenues. This settlement disappointed Arab nationalists who had hoped for independence in Iraq and elsewhere.

In 1920, a rebellion led by Iraqi nationalists left hundreds of British soldiers dead. It was put down by the British armed forces. Reports included the machine-gunning from the air of fleeing Iraqis and the use of poison gas (the British government later admitted using questionable methods).

Britain installed the figurehead Prince Faisal as King of Iraq. During the Great War, Faisal and his friend, Colonel T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia), had been leaders of an Arab bedouin army that harassed the Turks. King Faisal promised to safeguard British oil interests and he granted large oil concessions to British firms. For that, Britain paid him £800,000 per month. Despite Faisal's Islamic and pan-Arab credentials, however, he was not

© Island Tides Publishing Ltd. This article may be reproduced with this attribution, in its entirety, with notification to Island Tides Publishing Ltd.

'This article was published (September 11, 2003) in 'Gulf Islands, Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 15,000-20,000 copies in the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria, BC.'

Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada.

Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.

Email: islandtides@gulfislands.com.

Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

an Iraqi. As Iraq had never had a king before, nationalists viewed Faisal and the monarchy itself as an illegitimate British-created institution.

In July, 1928, the Iraqi oil business was divided between four companies: the British (Royal Dutch/Shell, and Anglo-Persian, later British Petroleum), the Americans (a consortium led by Standard Oil of New Jersey, or Esso), the French (Compagnie Francais des Pétroles), leaving 5% for a wily Armenian named Nubar Gulbenkian, who had been there first. In 1929 this unholy combination was named the Iraq Petroleum Company.

Running Iraq proved expensive and troublesome for the British, despite the oil concessions. In 1929, a newly elected British Labour government promised independence and in 1932, it was granted, with Faisal still as king. One year later, Faisal suddenly died.

In 1941, during World War II, Iraqi army commanders staged a coup d'état under the nominal leadership of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, who was suspected by the allies of pro-German sympathies. In the eyes of London the coup threatened the vital oil supply from the northern Iraq oil fields upon which British warfare in the Mediterranean depended. British and Indian forces landed in Basra and headed for Baghdad. At the same time the British-run Arab Legion marched from Trans-Jordan and attacked Rashid Ali's troops in the West.

The Iraqi army, fighting from behind defense lines organized along canals and fields flooded with water unleashed from tributaries of the Tigris and Euphrates, put up a respectable resistance. They also got support by Italian aircraft. But on May 30, the allied forces scattered Iraqi units on the outskirts of Baghdad.

To avoid the prospects of a house-to-house street battle, British General Clark opted for bluff. An interpreter phoned Rashid Ali's headquarters with exaggerated reports of British strength. The Iraqi leader panicked and scuttled to Persia. The British signed a lenient armistice that allowed the Iraqi army to retain its arms and return to its peacetime garrisons. From then on Iraq cooperated with the allies.

The city of Baghdad was the scene of another coup in 1958 led by General Abdul Karim Qassim, a nationalist officer. He overthrew the monarchy and established a republic. In 1963, Qassim was overthrown by officers of the Baath Party. The Baath Party took control of virtually all aspects of Iraqi society, including the Iraq Petroleum Company. The architect of that program was Saddam Hussein, who officially became president in 1979.

On September 22, 1980, Iraqi armed forces invaded western Iran along the countries' joint border. Iraq tried to seize control of the rich oil-producing Iranian border province of Khzest. Iraq's war effort was openly financed by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait,

and tacitly supported by the United States. Iraq's international reputation was damaged by reports that it had made use of lethal chemical weapons against Iranian troops.

The war carried on until 1988 when both countries accepted a United Nations-mediated ceasefire.

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait. Saddam Hussein had complained to the UN that Kuwait was drilling (horizontally) into Iraqi oil wells. When Kuwait called in promissory notes from Iraq, Saddam Hussein declared that Kuwait had become the 19th province of Iraq. In January and February of 1991, a 28-member coalition, including several Middle Eastern states and led by the United States, compelled Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait.

In March 2003, the United States and Britain invaded Iraq, without UN authorization, ostensibly to destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. But United Nations weapons inspectors had already declared that Iraq did not possess nuclear weapons and were coming close to concluding that Iraq had no dangerous stocks of chemical or biological weapons.

The American public was told the war was to protect the US from weapons of mass destruction and to bring freedom and democracy to Iraq. The French opposed the invasion.

'Imagine a September 11 with weapons of mass destruction. It's not 3,000. It's tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children.'-U.S. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, September 2002.

'I hope the good people of Iraq will remember our history, and not pay attention to the hateful propaganda of their government. America has never sought to dominate, has never sought to conquer. We've always sought to liberate and to free. Our desire is to help Iraqi citizens find the blessings of liberty within their own culture and their own traditions.' --George W. Bush, October 2002

Iraq used only conventional weapons during this invasion, no match for US and British air and ground weaponry. The US and UK had total control of the air and bombarded Iraqi military installations and cities with guided missiles and bombs. The Iraqi troops deserted en masse and little defense was mounted for Baghdad. The house-to-house battle for Baghdad predicted by the Pentagon didn't happen. The city of Baghdad fell on April 9. Saddam Hussein disappeared without a trace, and weapons of mass destruction were not found. The Americans resumed oil export on April 23, though not directly from Iraqi oilfields, which had been badly run down during the nineties, with infrastructure damaged by various wars and by looting after the 2003 war.

The US military command had declared that the invasion of Iraq was to be a war of liberation for Iraqis, and promised an early handover to Iraqi democracy. They are now working hard to resume production from Iraqi oilfields. ✍

© Island Tides Publishing Ltd. This article may be reproduced with this attribution, in its entirety, with notification to Island Tides Publishing Ltd.

'This article was published (October 9, 2003) in 'Gulf Islands, Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 15,000-20,000 copies in the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria, BC.'

Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada.
Email: islandtides@gulfislands.com.

Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>
