

A SYDNEY AIRMAN AND THE ASSYRIAN PATRIARCH

by Philimon Darmo

Assyrians around the world will soon be observing Assyrian Martyrs Day on 7 August 1998. This day was chosen as the remembrance day to commemorate the massacres in 1933 in the Assyrian village of Simel and surrounding villages situated to the north of the city of Mosul in Northern Iraq. 7 August is of course not confined to the events of 1933 but encompasses all of Assyrian martyrs throughout our long history.

The events of 1933 were well recorded in the world press on a daily basis, especially the English speaking press. My dear friend Romeo Hanna has spent endless hours, since his arrival in this country in the early seventies, searching the archives of central libraries in Australia looking for anything written about Assyrians for as far back as the archival records go. The fruit of his invaluable work has been close to 3000 pages of photocopied material going back to the first half of nineteenth century. The background information given in this flashback to August 1933 is extracted from some of the pages Romeo has managed to dig up.

One of the events which soon followed the massacres in Simel and surrounding villages was the detention and subsequent deportation of the Assyrian hero and leader, His Holiness Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII to the island of Cyprus after the Iraqi authorities had decided to strip him of his Iraqi citizenship.

The *New York Times* of 19 August 1933 writes:

"The Nestorian Patriarch Mar Shimun, Ethnarch of the Assyrians, who has been under detention for some time for having declined to sign a declaration of loyalty to King Feisal and agree not to thwart the scheme of the League of Nations for the settlement of the Assyrians, was deported by the order of the government today (18 August 1933) and deprived of Iraqi nationality.

The British air officer commanding in Iraq was present at the Hinaidi airdrome when Mar Shimun left in a British machine for Jerusalem en route to Cyprus.... "

The *Argus* newspaper (published in Melbourne, Australia) of 21 August 1933 wrote about the same event:

"In accordance with the Iraq Government's deportation order the Patriarch Mar Shimun left to-day (19 August 1933) in a Royal Air Force airplane, by way of Palestine, for Cyprus, where his father and brother have also been given asylum.. "

The same news item appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 21 August 1933.

The press reports quoted above say that His

Holiness left Hinaidi airdrome in a British aircraft for Cyprus *by way of Palestine*. But, did the British Royal Air Force plane fly His Holiness (and those with him) direct to Cyprus after stopping in Palestine? Material dug up by Romeo Hanna tells us it did not. It tells that His Holiness disembarked in Palestine and was flown to Cyprus in another British RAF machine several days later. What we Assyrians of Australia find interesting about the material is that this second British RAF machine was piloted by an Australian pilot who at the time was stationed in Basra.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 1 February 1934 published an article under the title **A Sydney Airman and the Assyrian Patriarch**. The article contained a letter received from Basra from Flying Officer Normand Berry Littlejohn, in which he described his involvement in getting Mar Eshai Shimun from Palestine to Cyprus.

At the time, Mr. Littlejohn's parents lived in Strathfield, one of the western suburbs of Sydney, not far from downtown Sydney. In his letter Mr. Littlejohn described how he flew his flying boat from Basra to Alexandretta (presently Iskendarun in Turkey) at the extreme northeast corner of the Mediterranean and then to Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee) where he received the Assyrian Patriarch and others accompanying him and flew them to the port of Famagosta in Cyprus.

Mr. Littlejohn described the aircraft which he flew as the **Short Rangoon**, which was the service adaptation of the **Calcutta** which was used by the Imperial Airways. The aircraft had three engines, each giving 525 horsepower, and carried a normal crew of seven. Flying Officer Littlejohn was one of the three Australian members of the Royal Australian Air Force selected by the Australian authorities for commissions offered by the British authorities in the British Royal Air Force. He was the navigation officer of the squadron based at Basra.

The following is an extract from Flying Officer Littlejohn's letter in which he tells how he flew the Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun to Cyprus:

"I had gone down to Ras al-Khaimah to take a wireless set to one of the sloops, and was expecting to go back slowly, inspecting native villages on the way, but just after handing over the set to the sloop concerned I received an urgent signal to return to Basra. I immediately left Ras al-Khiamah and flew direct to Bahrain where I had to refuel. I then left again and set a course direct for Basra.

However, the dust got thicker and thicker till finally, just as I reached the head of the gulf, it was so thick that I could not continue, and I had to alight and anchor. At dawn next day I flew on to Basra where I was told that I would be leaving immediately for Cyprus.

"I had some breakfast, put more food on board and an hour later left for Hinaidi, via the Tigris, that being the first stage of the trip. We had a rotten trip up, as dust was thick and the wind strong. However, we reached Hinaidi after six hours flying and then crossed to Lake al-Habbaniya where we alighted, refueled and anchored for the night. The next day we left for Alexandretta, which was the second stage, but owing to the strong head wind had to return to Habbaniya. The following day the wind continued, but the day after that the wind had dropped and we left Habbaniya at 0400 local time, and flew in darkness for an hour. The course was up the Euphrates to Meskine, and across the desert, over Aleppo and Alexandretta.

"It was a little worrying as the Euphrates is too shallow to alight in and an engine failure meant a broken aircraft. But the real worry started after leaving Meskine, when we had only sand under us, and just after passing Aleppo the oil pressure in my centre engine dropped and the engine commenced to die out. I throttled it back and opened the other two and managed to reach Lake Bahra, which is 25 miles short of Alexandretta. If the lake had not been there, it would have meant a crash, as the mountains between Lake Bahra and Alexandretta are 5000 feet high. We anchored in the lake and the two fitters got to work on the engine, the trouble being the losing of a drain plug from the oil tank. A new one was fitted and the tank refilled. We then took off, climbed up, and after crossing the mountains, alighted at Alexandretta. It was a marvelous change just to

cross the mountains, for on the eastern side, Syria looks very much like Iraq, dried up brown and barren but on the western side, that is the Mediterranean side, everything was green and smiling. As we glided over the white houses and red roof tops of the town, I was struck by the complete contrast effected in a distance of only 20 miles. We moored up in front of the town. Almost the first boat to reach us contained the Mayor and the British Agent, and we were invited to lunch and to be guests of the Mayor for the night.

"We went ashore and had a meal, and then refueled the aircraft, a job that took some time. All was finished at last, and we went ashore, the crew to stay in the town, and my second pilot and self to be taken up the mountain to the Mayor's summer residence. That night we attended an official dinner and met, among others, the commandant of the French Air Force in Aleppo. Next morning we bid a sorrowful farewell to Alexandretta and flew down the coast towards Haifa. Just flying down the coast was pure joy, the dark green of the vegetation resting one's eyes.

"On reaching Acre we turned inland, and flew across Lake Tiberias, where we alighted, anchoring off Semakh, at the south end of the lake. After refueling, we went by car to Tiberias, where we stayed in the hotel. The following morning, we returned to Semakh, received the Assyrian Patriarch and various satellites, and embarked them. We then took off, flew overland to the coast, and set a course for Famagosta, Cyprus. We arrived at Famagosta after an uneventful trip and moored up inside the artificial harbour. An official boat then came alongside and removed the Patriarch.... "

It appears from the above account by the Sydney airman Normand Berry Littlejohn that His Holiness Mar Eshai Shimun spent about one week in Palestine before being flown to Cyprus.