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The Levies Move to Hinaidi, 1928:

By 1928 Great Britain had withdrawn all the British and Indian Army troops from Iraq but they still maintained three Air Bases in the country: Mosul, Shaiba and Hinaidi. To them Hinaidi was by far the most important. It was the biggest base in the country, with more accommodations for aircraft and personnel, and better maintenance facilities. The War Office had spent a lot of money on it before 1922 when the Air Ministry took it over and spent another £600,000. Hinaidi was only five miles from Baghdad and thus in close contact with the High Commissioner; it was linked by railway and river transport to Basra. In view of all this the Air Ministry declared that it would vacate the Mosul Base and move to Hinaidi. About this time Levy troop level was: two battalions, headquarters, two machine gun sections, transport and remounts. Now the Air Vice-Marshal ordered the Levy headquarters to leave Mosul for Baghdad. Levy troops were to replace the last of the Indian Army Battalions in Iraq. The Assyrians were to take over guard duties at the High Commissioner's house, the Air Vice-Marshal's house, the aerodome, as well as to perform numerous other duties.

The Levy Pay Office went to Baghdad on June 29th. Three months later the Iraqi Army received from the Assyrians the Mosul Air Base and took over guard duties. On October 13th, the machine gun section, the depot, ambulance, and transport left for Hinaidi via Kirkuk. Part of the Second Assyrian Battalion took over guard duties in Baghdad from the 5th Mahrattas Battalion on October 18th, and finally on October 30th, the Levy Headquarters opened up in Hinaidi after spending six years in Mosul. It is noteworthy that other Levy forces were still in Northern Iraq, and in November of that year a combined force of Iraqi army troops and Assyrian Levies stopped a major Kurdish advance from Iran aimed at the border town of Penjwin. It was led by Shiekh Mahmud of Suleimaniya.

In view of the terms of the new Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, a gradual reduction of Levy Troop strength was to take place. On April 1, 1933, the effective Levy strength was to level off at 1250 men. On February 16, 1932, one company of the Second Assyrian Battalion moved to Basra to take over guard duties at Margil and Shaiba. The R.A.F. Air Base at Shaiba was about 10 miles from Basra. It had a satellite seaplane anchorage base in Basra. Shaiba was important because it was on the air

route to India; it was a secure place because the Royal Navy could protect it from the Persian Gulf. Later on many Assyrians moved to Shaiba and the Church of Mar Benyamin was constructed in the 1940's. Shaiba was to play a crucial role during the Rashid Ali Al-Gailani revolt in 1941.

The Iraqis were never comfortable with the presence of a British Military Base so close to Baghdad. So it was agreed by the British High Commissioner, Sir Francis Humphrys, that the British could vacate Hinaidi to a new Air Base that would be built near Lake Habbaniya about 50 miles west of Baghdad. The A.O.C., Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, concurred with the idea declaring Habbaniya a desirable location. The building of the Base was to cost the British some £2,000,000. The Assyrians were to stay in Hinaidi for a number of years until the new Royal Air Base in Habbaniya was to be completed.

Author's Note:

During World War II both Habbaniya and Shaiba proved crucial to the allied war effort. They served to protect the British position in the Middle East. After the Habbaniya campaign of May 1941 the Levy force was expanded. Some three thousand additional Assyrians were recruited, many coming from Khabur area in Syria. For the remainder of the war the Levies protected vital allied installations in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Cyprus. In September 1944, Assyrian paratroopers fought German Panzers in Arnhem, Holland. In 1946, they took part in the great victory parade in London. Half a century later Levy veterans could be found in all the major Assyrian centers in the world, from Baghdad to London and from Chicago to Sydney, Australia.

The Levies and the 1933 Crisis:

In a recent article, I had written in some detail about the failed Assyrian coup of June 1932, which was a last ditch effort by the Levies to force some settlement before the termination of the British mandate. However, early in 1933, it became increasingly apparent that Assyrian aspirations regarding their settlement as an enclave within Iraq, with their Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII as their temporal head, would never be fulfilled. Also, it began to be realized, that Britain would not attempt to compel Iraq to accept Assyrian demands, and for the first time, the Assyrian leaders began to explore the possibility of

migration to Syria.

In the summer of 1933, an Assyrian military force was created around Dohuk. It was largely made up of ex-Levy soldiers and officers. It was commanded by Malik Yacu D'Malik Ismael of Upper Tiyari and Malik Lawco of Tkhuma. This force crossed the border into Syria but after attempting to recross it back into Iraq, it clashed with units of the Iraqi army in what became known as the battle of Dairabun. The following is a brief account of that engagement:

Dairabun is a small Assyrian village just east of the Tigris river separating Iraq from Syria. It is also south of the Khabur river on the Turkish border. The Iraqis had deployed in this theater some four battalions of infantry backed up by artillery, cavalry and police. On the afternoon of August 4th, an Assyrian force numbering some 550 riflemen crossed the Tigris river. On recrossing, the Iraqi commander immediately launched an attack with infantry and cavalry, but after a fierce clash this force had to retreat under the weight of the Assyrian advance. They made it to the main base in Dairabun. Later on during the night, the Assyrians launched an offensive against this base. Malik Yacu led the Tiyaris on a right flanking move, while Malik Lawco launched a frontal assault. One Iraqi position fell to Lawco. Heavy fighting ensued until the morning of the fifth when Iraqi aircraft, operating from Mosul, attacked Assyrian positions with bombs and machine gun fire. Iraqi reinforcements began to arrive on the scene in large numbers. The Iraqis opened up with a massive artillery barrage to be followed by an infantry assault. Here Malik Lawco was wounded, and with ammunition running low, the Assyrian command decided on a retreat across the river into French controlled Syria. This was accomplished with no casualties and this engagement was over. The Assyrians had lost ten men and thirteen were wounded. The Iraqi casualties were 33 dead and 40 wounded.

The Levies during the Crisis: Just before the disturbances, the British made each soldier of the Levies take a solemn oath that he would not take any part in politics but will confine his allegiance entirely to the A.O.C. and the British officers of the Levies (as events were to show) and each Assyrian kept his oath. A British confidential paper reports on this matter by the following statement. "The staunchness and loyalty of the Levy company at Mosul during all this trying time cannot be too highly praised, although constantly receiving news of the deaths of their friends and relations. And, without news of their own wives and children, owing to the situation in Mosul, they loyally carried out orders of their officers. Even to the guarding of Iraqi aircraft actually being employed in action against their countrymen." Though from early August pressure had been brought to bear by the

Iraqi government for the Assyrian company to be moved from Mosul and be replaced by the newly raised Kurdish company from Hinaidi. This demand was resisted until November as the retention of the Assyrian company at Mosul gave a feeling of some security to the whole Christian community. During this period the remaining Assyrian companies in Hinaidi, too, acted with exemplary restraint even when the life of their spiritual leader, Mar Eshai Shimun was thought to be in danger in Baghdad.

Author's Note:

Over the next few years, Upper Tiyari and Tkhuma tribes, along with many other Assyrians, migrated to French controlled Syria. In Iraq, the dust settled gradually. In 1936 a new British Base was built in Habbaniya. It was to become the new home of the Levies for the next 19 years, along with thousands of Assyrian civilians. It soon became the major Assyrian center in Iraq. The story of the Levies came to an abrupt end on May 2, 1955, when the Union Jack was lowered for the last time, marking the official disbandment of the Assyrian Levies.

The Assyrian Refugees of 1933:

The Assyrian situation in Iraq reached a tragic climax in early August 1933 when hundreds of Assyrians, men, women and children, in Northern Iraq were killed in clashes and massacres involving the Iraqi army and Kurdish tribesmen. The British, anticipating trouble, dispatched armored cars and Air Commodore A. D. Cunningham to Mosul. On August 7th, the Levy Summer Training Camp in Ser-Amadia was closed, and the Levy detachment was then evacuated. My mother watched from the window of her house while Levy trucks, with cover down, moved through Dohuk heading South. On August 10th aircraft of No. 30 Squadron were ordered to reconnoitre further afield for burning Assyrian villages, supposedly to discourage the Kurds from further depredation. On August 17, the government ordered Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun and his family deported from Iraq. The British Commander in Iraq, Air Vice-Marshal C.S. Burnett, assured the Patriarch that as soon as he left the country the British would establish a refugee camp for the Assyrian widows and orphans. On August 18th, Mar Shimun, along with members of his family were flown in a Victoria Aircraft of No. 70 Squadron to Cyprus via Palestine. Later, on August 31 Lady Surma D'Mar Shimun left by air to Palestine with 13 members of her family. Then they took a ship to Larnaca, Cyprus.

The Assyrian refugees in August 1933 belonged to three categories: 1-Families of men who fought in the Dairabun battle and subsequently moved into Syria. 2-Families of Men who had been killed in the massacres of 1933. 3-Dependents of the

Assyrian Levies. On August 17, a written authorization was received by the British to inquire about the fate of the refugees, and a Commission composed of R.A.F. and Levy officers was established. This Commission developed into an organization to arrange for the collection and evacuation of destitute dependents to Hinaidi. However, the real work did not begin until September 16, when a refugee camp was established by the government in Mosul for the dependents of those Assyrians who had moved to Syria, and of the widows and orphans of the men who had been killed during the disorders. The Iraqi representative in Geneva explained the Mosul refugee camp as part of a relief arrangement by Iraq, and that Iraq was prepared to assist the Assyrians while they remained in Iraq and to help them move to a new country when one was found for them by the League of Nations.

The new refugee camp was supervised by Major D. B. Thomson who had arrived in Iraq in early 1933 to assist the government with the settlement of Assyrians in Iraq. The average population of the camp was about 1,550 at any one time, all women and children with the exception of a few old men. According to Col. R.S. Stafford the camp was costing the Iraq government about 200 pounds a week. The food was ample, blankets and clothes were provided, tents were erected. Some of the young children did die because of ill health, and an outbreak of diphtheria was quickly checked by Lieutenant Dixon, a doctor on loan from the R.A.F.

The tragic story of the Assyrian Refugees of 1933 could not be complete without mentioning the name of a great Assyrian patriot woman by the name of Shereni. She was the daughter of *Shamasha* Dawid of Tal and wife of Goriel Younadow of Tkhuma. Shereni personally led a women's demonstration in front of the Iraqi police

force that had come to the residence of Surma Khanim to enforce her deportation. She also carried messages from Lady Surma to the Mutasarrif and to Col. Stafford. Later she led two more demonstrations in front of the British and French consulates in Mosul. Shereni helped the panic-stricken refugees who were pouring into Mosul from the outlying villages. She gave them food and clothing. Also she helped settle some 40 Assyrians in a church.

The R.A.F. started flying dependents of the Assyrian Levies to the Air Base of Hinaidi in September 1933. Victoria aircraft flew four sorties a day by October 23. No fewer than 790 refugees, mostly women and children, were carried south. Among them were two sisters of the author who remember the flight till this day. A further 1,500 women and children, who were dependents of the 550 Assyrian men, veterans of the battle of Dairabun, were accepted by the French authorities in Syria after Iraq made a payment of £10,000. By the end of 1936, Assyrians of all persuasions, totaling some 8,500, were relocated to Syria after France was paid a sum of money by Britain, Iraq and the League of Nations. The French authorities settled the Assyrians on the banks of the Khabur River about 40 miles from the Iraq border. Assyrians were given material to build houses, irrigation machinery, and in some cases rifles. Eventually a total of 35 villages were to be built on both banks of the Khabur River. The rest of the Assyrians remained in Iraq. All efforts to settle them outside Iraq failed mainly because the world was in the grips of economic depression; and by 1937 the British government abandoned hope of placing Assyrians elsewhere and decided, all on its own, that the best chance for a secure future would be for the Assyrians to settle down as Iraqi citizens.
