

these should not be controlled from India. Since the great majority of troops in Iraq would in all probability be Indian and the line of communications through the Persian Gulf to Basra must be under Indian direction, I agreed that there would be considerable advantage in India assuming command, at all events of the Basra base and of operations in lower Iraq. Accordingly, on the landing of this force at Basra, responsibility for Iraq was handed over to the Commander-in-Chief in India.

77. The first effects of the landings of troops were favourable. But when Rashid Ali was informed that a second brigade would shortly be landed, he sought to refuse permission until the original brigade had moved out of Iraq. While the question was still under discussion Rashid Ali and the pro-Axis elements in Baghdad decided to take action against the Royal Air Force station at Habbaniyah, to which place the British women and children in Baghdad had been transferred on 29th April, in view of the obviously threatening attitude of certain elements in Baghdad.

78. The Air Force station at Habbaniyah lies on low ground near the River Euphrates, and is completely overlooked and commanded by high ground to the west between the station and Lake Habbaniyah. This ground is 150 ft. high and only some 1,000 yards from the station. The small force of levies at Habbaniyah was quite insufficient to occupy this high ground, on which the Iraqi mechanized force of approximately a brigade, with several batteries and a number of tanks and armoured cars, installed itself on 30th April. While the Ambassador at Baghdad was trying to secure the withdrawal of this Iraqi force by diplomatic means, its numbers were increased, till by the evening of 1st May, the total was about 11 battalions with some 50 guns, over 9,000 men in all. Their attitude became so threatening that the Air Officer Commanding Iraq, Air Vice-Marshal Smart, decided that it was essential to attack these troops without further warning. Accordingly, in the early morning of 2nd May, an improvised air force, made up mainly from the machines in the training school attacked the Iraqi forces. It was hoped that the effect of air bombing might shake the morale of the Iraqi troops and cause them to withdraw. The attacks did not, however, have the desired effect, the Iraqis finding good concealment in broken ground and maintaining their positions, although the ultimate result of this bombing must have contributed to their subsequent defeat and further air attacks on reserves prevented effective reinforcement.

79. The situation of the Royal Air Force in Habbaniyah was now critical. The defenders comprised only some 350 British infantry (flown up from Basra), R.A.F. Armoured Car Company of 18 cars, about 1,000 Royal Air Force personnel, and six companies of levies. They had no artillery and had to defend a perimeter of 7 miles, including the river frontage. The Iraqis on the high ground could command at close range with artillery and even with machine-guns the aerodrome from which machines had to take off and land and had they made a determined assault, it would hardly have been possible to withstand them. As it was they contented themselves with artillery fire, which did little damage. The Iraqi Air Force also began bombing attacks on Habbaniyah.

Reinforcement or relief of the garrison presented considerable difficulty; it was flood season in Iraq, which made movement from Basra by rail, road or river towards Baghdad difficult, and Iraqi forces had occupied points on the Tigris and on the railway to prevent movement northwards from Basra. A British battalion (1st King's Own Royal Regiment) was sent by air from Basra to Habbaniyah to reinforce the garrison and such aeroplanes as could be spared from Middle East were sent to Habbaniyah. These put the Iraqi Air Force out of action by 7th May, but meanwhile German air forces were being transported to Iraq, using landing grounds in Syria on the way, without interference and without protest from the Vichy French.

80. On 5th May, the War Cabinet transferred the responsibility for Iraq back from India to Middle East, and I was instructed to send a force across the desert to relieve Habbaniyah and occupy Baghdad. The only mobile force I could make available from Palestine was one cavalry brigade group. If this force was despatched to Iraq, there would be no possibility of providing a force for Syria should the need arise. The Chiefs of Staff accepted this conclusion and took the responsibility of ordering this force to be sent to Iraq. Accordingly, I made up a motorised column consisting of the 4th Cavalry Brigade, under Brigadier Kingstone (Household Cavalry Regiment, Wiltshire Yeomanry, Warwickshire Yeomanry), 60th Field Regiment, R.A., from Egypt and 1st Essex Regiment. The whole force was placed under the command of Major-General J. G. W. Clark, the Commander of the 1st Cavalry Division. The Arab Legion, a military police force enlisted in Transjordan from Bedouin Arabs, also accompanied the force and gave invaluable assistance.

There was extreme difficulty in raising sufficient transport for even this small force, and it was not until 10th May that it was possible for the force to advance across the Iraq frontier. Meanwhile, Iraqi forces had occupied the fort at Rutbah. The distance from Haifa to the Transjordan frontier is 284 miles, thence to Habbaniyah, 285 miles.

81. On 7th May, the garrison at Habbaniyah made a successful sortie and drove the Iraqi troops from the high ground overlooking the station, capturing some 400 prisoners, six guns and much equipment. The Iraqi forces retreated to Fallujah on the Euphrates.

On 18th May, Habforce, as Major-General Clark's column was termed, after recapturing Rutbah, where the Arab Legion greatly distinguished itself, reached Habbaniyah. It then began an advance on Baghdad by Fallujah, where, however, it was delayed for some days owing to the floods making the approaches to the river impassable for mechanical vehicles. After the road had been repaired with some difficulty, Fallujah was captured on 19th May. On 22nd May, an Iraqi force made a determined attack on Fallujah and succeeded temporarily in reoccupying the town. It was, however, driven out by a counter attack with considerable losses.

82. On 23rd May I flew to Basra to meet the Commander-in-Chief in India, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, to discuss further reinforcements and operations in Iraq. I instructed General Quinan, commanding the Indian forces, now that the situation at Basra was in hand, to