

WITH THE DESERT POLICE OF IRAQ

What Manner of Men They Are Who Keep the Pax Britannica in the Land of the Caliphs of Bagdad



Two Scouts of the Camel Corps Visiting the Black Tents of the Tribesmen.

By MERIAN C. COOPER

Photographs by Ernest Beaumont Schwesack

THERE is only one American in Bagdad, the City of Caliphs. His name is Randolph, and he is the American Consul. Randolph is a good fellow and is a dignified and capable representative of our country, but the balcony to his house is a menace to the life of any American citizen who drifts into Iraq. It hangs out some twenty feet straight over the swift-flowing and murky waters of the Tigris, and looks as if any day it might take a sudden drop—carrying with it any unlucky persons who had trusted themselves to stand upon it—down into the historic stream.

We were standing on this balcony yesterday afternoon and, despite the nervousness which I felt over our situation, were carrying on a fairly coherent conversation about life in Northern Arabia. Said Shorty: "Why, this country is our Wild West of fifty years ago all over again! The Bedouins play the part of the North American Indians of the '60s. They live in tents, are always scrapping with each other, and raid caravans and settlements in slashing good style. And, just as we had a desert trail from the East out across the Plains to the Rockies, so North Arabia has the caravan track between Syria and the Iraq, and with the same trappings, too—bandits, hard-riding, straight-shooting rangers, lonely blockhouses and all. Yes, it's the old Wild West for sure."

Shorty based his theory on impressions received during the trip we have just made across Northern Arabia, and on a visit to the outer frontier post of the camel corps of the Delain Desert Force. This post lies two hundred and fifty miles "out in the blue," as the English of Iraq call the desert. On our trip across the northern part of this huge peninsula we went straight west from Aleppo across the desert to the Euphrates, then rode for four hundred miles or more down its valley until we reached the ancient capital of Haroun-al-Raschid, now the home of King Feisal of Iraq. We traveled in two Ford's; the three of us rode in the leading car, our baggage and extra gasoline tins followed in the other.

This trip was dangerous a couple of years ago. But during the last year the French have made the Syrian part of the trail safe by the liberal use of machine guns, bombs and whips, while the English have accomplished the same thing in Iraq with a small but efficient camel corps.

There has been no dangerous rising of the tribes in this part of Iraq since 1920. Last year, indeed, there were only fourteen raids on caravans on the Iraq part of this road, and I

think on the Syrian part there were but few more. Our driver, a husky little Bagdad by name Joseph Jacob, said, with his engaging grin, that he had been "stuck up" three times on the Syrian side of the line. But in the last six months conditions have enormously improved, and I would not hesitate to recommend the trip as safe to any one contemplating visiting Bagdad or Persia. The shorter trip across the desert from Damascus to Bagdad is quite secure, as the Bedouin Sheiks along the line have been subsidized by the Iraq Government "to be good."

The morning of our departure from Aleppo was beautifully clear, and the queer little Arab villages of the settled area near the town stood out against the sky like groups of giant beehives, which they so closely resemble.

From this agricultural country we passed, after two or three hours of rough going, into a desolate waste of lifeless hills of rock and sand, which rose up out of the desert in fierce bleakness. And then suddenly we bumped out through a rock-hewn pass and found ourselves on the border of a great green valley ten miles across and disappearing to the southeast into the horizon. Its surface was as flat and smooth and soft as velvet carpet upon the polished floor of some enormous Hall of the Gods. Down through the centre of this great emerald valley, there flowed, like a huge twisting stripe, a broad, brown river. It was the Euphrates. We were in the Cradle of the World. We had never dreamed that anything in the great desert could look so cool and beautiful and green as this valley of the Euphrates in the Spring. And the

whole length of it was teeming with life. As far as we could see, the black tents of the tribesmen dotted its green surface, while thousands of sheep grazed placidly under the eyes of their long-robed shepherds, each of whom, by the way, proved on near inspection to have a good modern military rifle slung across his back.

And so it was for two days. We traveled on and on to the southeast, ever following the path of the great river, and ever we were amazed when we saw in the heart of that sun-enveloped land this emerald valley with its countless black tents and its hundreds of thousands of sheep and thousands of camels. At long intervals we would pass a group of Syrian cavalry, and at noon of the first day we stopped at a dreary French army post, where young poilus and black Senegalese from Africa wandered about listlessly. The first night we slept in the one room of an old ruined khan—all three of us, as usual, spreading our bedding rolls on the hard-packed ground. Sometimes we would pass a slow-moving camel train crawling wearily along, heavily escorted, every man visibly armed.

The second night we slept in Dair El Zor, an Arab river town which bore all the appearance of a place at war. It was filled with French troops and that evening there came wearily back across the first bridge we had seen over the Euphrates a column made up of infantry, cavalry and camelmen. Though all wore the uniform of France, there were men of a score of nations marching in the dusty ranks. It was a brigade of the famous Foreign Legion, brought 3,000 miles from Morocco to fight France's bat-

tle of conquest on the far frontier of Eastern Syria.

During the third day the appearance of the Euphrates changed. No more did we see the black tents. The river bottom became choked with dismal brown weeds; the desert, stretching away to the horizon on all sides, seemed still more desolate. Not a single black tent, not a shepherd, not a caravan. Only a tiny hamlet in the desert marked the border of Syria.

Fifteen or twenty miles further on we swung once more in sight of the Euphrates, and, coming over a rise in the ground, saw, a mile away, a long, low little white fortress on a low hill. Close your eyes and try to imagine this vast burning desert with the muddy river winding through it, and then let your imagination sweep you on over the great wilderness of sand until you see in its complete insignificance this one lone place of human habitation burning white under the Arabian sun.

We drove up, and half a dozen men came leisurely out. They were hung all over with cartridge belts, daggers, pistols and such ornaments, and they were all in uniform. But what a uniform! None of your tight tunics and puttees and dinky little caps, but in red and brown and white they wore the graceful costume of the Bedouin, and each man had fastened to the braids of his black "agals"—the cords which are worn as a sort of double crown on the bright red headdress—a big silver star bearing the words "Iraq Police." From under that simple English phrasing there stared unblinkingly the faces of as fierce-featured Central Arabians as you can imagine.

Guided by a dignified non-commissioned officer, with feminine-like braids hanging down on each side of his stern countenance, we walked through a long, cool, grateful arch into the brilliant sunlight of the courtyard. It was as blazingly white as the outer walls, and on every side beautifully arched doors led off into the rooms made in the walls. Outer stairs built in the wall mounted to a sort of second story. On either side of these stairs and placed against the side of the walls were black and brown tents.

This was El Giam, the outermost post of the Iraq Desert Police, garrisoned by sixty men of the camel corps and half as many horsemen.

At the top of the stairs stood a stocky figure in a British officer's tunic; but he had the brown face and the Semitic features of the well-born Arab. It was the Commandant of the post. In broken English he invited us to be his guests for the night, saying, partly through the interpretation of Joseph Jacob, that all travel was forbidden after sundown, and that it was impossible that we reach the next khan by that time. We accepted. He courteously insisted that we take his room. It was a tiny, narrow chamber, furnished with two camp beds, a bench covered with an Oriental rug, and with a big arms rack hung with pistols, rifles, and ammunition belts.

Shorty and I wandered down into the courtyard. On a mat in the entrance to one of the tents three men were drinking tea. We noticed that there was something peculiar about their appearance. This was an Arab post, yet only one of the men had the straight, clean-cut features of the desert Arab. The second was coal-black, with the full lips and flat nose of the negro, while the third was fair-haired and blue-eyed, with his white skin only tanned by the fierce desert sun.

The presence of the negro we could understand, for we found at least a third of the men there were from Njad, that little-known kingdom of Central Arabia, and, strangely enough, from this land, whose inhabitants should be of the purest Arab blood, come men who are undoubtedly of negro descent. This is because they are the children of negro slave women who are brought across the Red Sea and carried in slave caravans far into the interior of Arabia.

But the third man—the white man, young, with a heavy crease of suffering straight down his forehead—this man we couldn't place.

"He looks like a Slav, if I ever saw one," said Shorty.

Half an hour later we saw this white man wearing the dress of an Arab come galloping down the slope, riding bareback with magnificent grace a fine, spotless white Arab

On the Banks of the Euphrates—Silhouette of a Man of the Desert



WITH THE IRAQ DESERT PATROL

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norse. He pulled up in front of us, and said in French:

"The Commandant says you wish a photograph of one of us on horseback. I am at your service."

I asked in astonishment, "Are you French?"

"No, Russian." Then, with pride, "I am a Cossack."

A Russian Cossack, living as a soldier of the Arab Desert Force! It brought back a torrent of memories. These Russian exiles scattered over the world! I recalled an old Russian cavalry General whom I had met in Abyssinia, where he was in charge of the dairy of the Prince of that country, a little aviation Colonel, who was commanding the Air Forces of the King of the Hejaz, at Jiddah, the walled town which is the port of Mecca; and women of the old Russian aristocracy dancing for the scum of the East in the cafés of Constantinople.

This young Cossack with the wrinkle of suffering down his forehead had been given the name of "the Eagle" by his Arab fellows. And he had made an eagle flight in his day. Called at 17 from his village down near the Caspian Sea, he had served in the army of the Czar against the Germans; then, after the revolution, had fought with Kolchak in Siberia. After that Admiral-General had died with eyes unbound as he faced a firing squad, the Eagle had made his way clear across Siberia to the Ukraine, where he had joined Dennekin. After the rout of this army he had become one of the famous Cossack guard of the last of the White Russians—Wrangel.

And then: "We were beaten. And what was there left for me? Me, I am a Cossack, a soldier. That is all I know. So I joined the French Foreign Legion. And I was sent to serve in Syria. But the Cossack is a free soldier, and the soldier of the Foreign Legion is only a dog. So one day I ran away."

He had fled during the night out into the desert, where he had been captured by wandering Bedouins, stripped stark naked, and then turned loose to tramp three days without food or water until he had reached El Giam, where he had enlisted in the Desert Police. (The law, now, however, required that all deserters from the legion should be sent back!) That was his story, and the officer confirmed it.

Across from us was a room with a locked door. A guard stood outside. We had thought it probably contained some desert robber lately taken until the Eagle whispered: "There is a German sergeant there. He has just deserted from the Foreign Legion."

And that night, when we had dined off chicken and rice, eating mostly with our fingers, which to my mind is one of the finest things about Eastern life, the Commandant suddenly asked did we speak German. Five minutes later a stout little chap

in the uniform of a sergeant of the Foreign Legion, but with the typical bullet head of the Prussian, was led in. He brought his heels together with a resounding click and saluted. Then he, too, told his tale. He was nervous, evidently, for there was hanging over him the chance that he might be sent back on the mor-

row to the Turkish frontier. That was what the French officer said, but there was a girl here on the frontier whom I liked and who liked me and the Frenchman liked the girl, too. He said things to me no man could stand. I deserted and escaped over the frontier, and now I wait to hear what they will do with me here.

always carried in his hand, he had a pistol strapped around his waist and four heavy bandoliers of cartridges strung about his shoulders and body.

Fifty miles further south we dropped the killer, with mutual expressions of good-will. That night we slept in a khan on the banks of the Euphrates, adjacent to the next

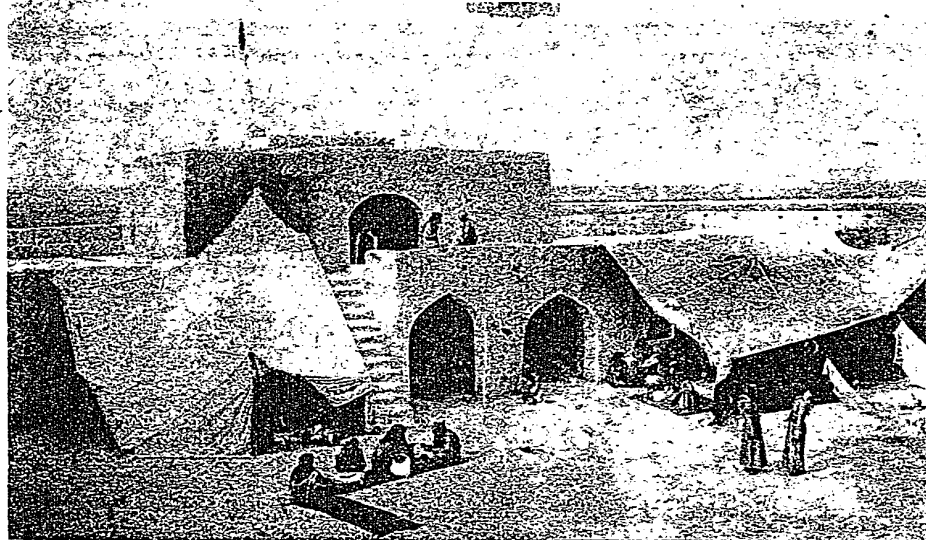
one of the chief ministers of Ibn Sa'ud, the all-powerful ruler of Najd. The minister had a rival in Ibn Sa'ud's favor. Our host, the Commandant, had come up behind the rival minister, as he rode along surrounded by his attendants, and had shot him through the back. He had escaped, and was now an exile in Iraq, where he had made a fine name for daring and ruthlessness as an officer of the Desert Police.

That night, after a hundred miles over the most desolate waste we had yet encountered, we reached the little Arab town of Ramadi. On the outskirts of the place a wireless mast stretched into the air. Near it, in a barbed-wire stockade, stood a small group of wooden barracks. Here was an emergency landing field for the Bagdad-Cairo Air Mail. I sat in the little wireless shack and listened to the boylike English sergeant talking with his key to the airplane that was then flying swiftly onward over a stretch of wild desert that would have taken dangerous months to cross a couple of years ago. Cairo to Bagdad by air in seven hours!

Here lived also the man we had been desirous to meet ever since we had entered Iraq. All the way through we had been hearing of "The Ruler of the Road," the Chief of the Desert Police, Captain Buttolph, who has made safe what was formerly one of the worst stretches of road in the world.

The next day we sighted across the desert the four golden minarets of Kazimain Mosque and within an hour had crossed the Euphrates and entered the city of Haroun-al-Raschid and the Arabian Nights.

N. B.—Later on, Shorty and I spent a week with Buttolph out with the Desert Patrol. The German deserter, dressed in Arab costume, was taken to the frontier of Iraq and turned loose, to find his way on foot to the Turkish frontier without one chance in three of getting there alive.



Outpost of the Iraq Desert Police at El Giam.

row to the French patrol over the border, and there death or a long sentence in prison awaited him. And the life of a prisoner who has deserted from the legion is not a pretty one, from all accounts. But he held up his head and spoke, with a dogged courage.

"You think it strange, no doubt, that I, a Prussian officer, I who have flown in the squadron of von Richtoven, should be in this uniform." He gesticulated stiffly at his French regimentals. "It was chance. I was in the Kapp push, for I wanted to see the good German Kaiser or the Crown Prince come back to our land, and when that failed I was proscribed, and so tried to flee with another officer to America. In Düsseldorf I was arrested by the French, accused of being a spy, and offered my freedom if I would agree to spy for France in the Fatherland. I refused, but accepted service in the Foreign Legion to save my life.

"For two years I served in Morocco, then I was sent here. Twice I have been wounded in the cause of the French, and last week I had completed four years of the five of my enlistment when I was accused of helping some Germans of my company to desert north over

But this I know, I will never go back to the legion."

They took the prisoner up to his room above, and I walked out from the low-ceilinged, lantern-lighted room, out from the little fort, out into the blackness beyond.

Before we left the next morning the Eagle had come to us and said: "The Commandant begs you to take his cousin away. He must leave quick."

The cousin, the Eagle explained, was a slim, fine-looking young Arab Sheik with whom we had drunk coffee several times the day before in the Commandant's office. This Sheik had killed the son of the ruler of a neighboring tribe and had been forced to flee for his life from the tents of his tribe, south of Bagdad. He had offered a large sum of "blood money," but the father of the dead boy had refused to accept it and demanded "a life for a life." So now the murderer traveled from place to place, never staying over a few weeks anywhere, as the family of the dead man was continually on his track. He had passed the danger limit of time at El Giam.

"We put the murderer in the front seat of our baggage car. He looked ready enough to protect himself against a regiment of avengers, as, in addition to a heavy rifle which he

post of the Desert Police. Here, too, we dined with the Commandant of the post. He was a slim man of 30, with a rather heavy mustache for an Arab. He moved with the slow deliberation of a Methodist minister and spoke in low, gentle, unhurried tones—a picture of peaceful and gentle tranquillity.

We found later that, three years before, he had been a follower of