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A CONCISE HISTORY OF:

PALESTINE & TRANS-JORDAN (HISTORY AND PERSONNEL)

A concise history of British Troops in Palestine & Trans-Jordan between 1930 and 1948, and the personnel who are known to have held key appointments in that command during that period.
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A Concise History of Palestine & Trans-Jordan (History & Personnel)

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Palestine & Trans-Jordan

The involvement of the United Kingdom in the politics of the Middle East extends over many years, but it was following the end of the Great War, or First World War, that British involvement increased. The success of the military campaigns in Gaza and Palestine, and in neighbouring Mesopotamia, gave the U.K. government military and political control of large areas of the former Ottoman Empire.

Prior to the Great War, or First World War, Palestine and Trans-Jordan were part of the Ottoman Empire. During that war, in their determination to defeat the Central Powers, the U.K. government made commitments to leaders of both the Arab and Jewish communities. In particular, the Balfour Declaration was seen by many as a clear intention to facilitate the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. The problem was that commitments had been made to Arab leaders for self-determination once the Ottoman Empire had been defeated. The conundrum was that the U.K. government, or its representatives, had given competing commitments to different groups, which involved their occupation of the same area of land.

The British had been left in de-facto control of Palestine, but in some measure of controversy, the French were given control of Syria and Lebanon. The U.K. government then set about establishing British governance of Palestine, and created the nominally independent nation of Trans-Jordan, or Jordan as it is known today, but under British influence. This led to years of conflict between Arabs and Jews, with the British caught up in a situation that some described as being of their own making. The United Kingdom assumed responsibility for the Mandate for Palestine and Trans-Jordan on 29 September 1923, with France assuming responsibility for Syria and The Lebanon. The United Kingdom also maintained a strategic interest in Mesopotamia, which became the country of Iraq. This gave Britain control over a swathe of territory from the Persian Gulf, up the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, through Trans-Jordan, to the Mediterranean Sea and Suez Canal.

The British formed Palestine Command on 1 February 1922 to control all British forces in the mandated territories. On 1 October 1926, it was renamed Headquarters Trans-Jordan and Palestine. This was a R.A.F. Command, as this service was given the lead in maintaining military control in both Palestine & Trans-Jordan and Iraq. It was reduced from Command to Group status on 21 February 1928, signifying its drop in activity and status. There were various periods of internal hostilities between the Jewish and Arab populations, which led to an increase in units deployed in the Command. In 1930, two British infantry battalions were detached from Malta Command and deployed to Palestine, namely:

- 2nd Bn. The South Staffordshire Regiment;
- 1st Bn. The Northamptonshire Regiment;

The two Army infantry battalions came under command of the Air Officer Commanding British Forces in Palestine, with the Lieutenant Colonel commanding the 1st Bn. The Northamptonshire Regiment acting as Officer Commanding Military Forces. There were some disturbances in 1933, but it was three years later, when a major upsurge in violence occurred. This was precipitated by the increased Jewish immigration into Palestine, driven by the increased persecution of Jews in parts of Europe, and the rise of the National Socialist Party in Germany. In consequence of increased hostility to Jewish people, the British Government policy opened up immigration to Palestine, seen as the homeland of the Jewish nation, and a place of safety for Jews from the hostility growing towards them.

In 1936, the Arab Higher Committee called for a general strike and relations broke down with the British authorities. As a result, there was an upsurge of violence between Jews and Arabs. Air Commodore Richard Edmund Charles PIERCE, D.S.O., A.F.C. was Air Officer Commanding, British Forces in Palestine & Trans-Jordan, having been appointed in 1933. On 1 January 1936, he was promoted Air Vice Marshal. With the increased violence, British Troops were begun to be posted to Palestine. On 8 September 1936, Lieutenant General J. G. DILL was appointed as the first General Officer Commanding, Palestine & Trans-Jordan, taking up the post on 15 September when control was passed to the War Office from the Air Ministry.

Two infantry brigades were deployed in Palestine from the United Kingdom in 1937. With the tensions increasing and terrorist acts taking place frequently, the British military forces in Palestine were increased to about twenty-thousand troops in 1938. Two infantry divisions were formed, neither which conformed to the standard infantry division establishment, as both were internal security formations and not intended for deployment outside of Palestine. They were:

- 7th Infantry Division in September 1938 (Major General R. N. O'CONNOR);
- 8th Infantry Division on 28 October 1938 (Major General B. L. MONTGOMERY).

The outbreak of the Second World War did not affect Palestine and Trans-jordan significantly. On 10 June 1940, Italy declared war on France and the United Kingdom, making the Mediterranean a theatre of conflict. The collapse of France later that month changed the political complexion of the Middle East, with the installation of the pro-German Vichy government in non-occupied France. Most of the French colonies and possessions, including Syria and Lebanon, declared their loyalty to the Vichy French government, meaning that there was now a pro-German, and hostile country to the north of the British mandate of Palestine.

The British forces in Palestine had been strengthened by the arrival of the 1st Cavalry Division in January 1940. The division was to assume the internal security duties from the two infantry divisions, which were drawn down to provide reinforcements for Egypt. Throughout the rest of the war, Palestine was relatively peaceful, and was used by the British as a major training base for the Middle East.

The first reinforcements after the outbreak of war were units of the 1 Cavalry Division, with the divisional headquarters opening in Haifa on 31 January 1940. The division had taken its horses with it, and initially deployed on internal security duties controlling the Arab and Jewish populations. During the Second World War, Palestine was relatively quiet, and became a major training base for the British Army. The Australian I Corps was based in Palestine for a period, before leaving for home in January 1942. Palestine and Trans-Jordan were used as the base from which Syria and Iraq were invaded in 1941. The Polish soldiers and their dependents that were released by STALIN moved overland from the Soviet Union to congregate in Palestine. Here they were formed into II Polish Corps and its subsidiary units.

In January 1945, the 1st Infantry Division arrived in Palestine from Italy. The division was sent to Palestine to rest and recuperate from its period of operational service in Italy. After hostilities in Europe ceased in May 1945, the continent was left in chaos, with millions of displaced and disenfranchised people. The persecution of Jewish people in Europe intensified the demands for a Jewish state in Palestine, and Jewish immigration increased to Palestine. The British found themselves managing rising violence between the Arab and Jewish communities, and violence and civil disobedience directed towards Palestine Police and British Forces. On 26 May 1946, Trans-Jordan was granted independence as the state of Jordan.

The U.K. Imperial Strategic Reserve, the 6th Airborne Division, was deployed to Palestine was sent to Palestine between 15 September and 6 November 1945. The formation was not deployed for internal security duties, but because Palestine was central in the British Empire, and had good airfields in the south of the country. Inevitably, it did get drawn in to the increasing violence between the Jewish and Arab communities, and the escalating attacks against British interests and armed forces stationed in Palestine. The 1st Infantry Division based in Palestine, and the 3rd Infantry Division based in Egypt, exchanged bases during 1946 and 1947, and there was a high turnover of personnel and units as the British Army demobilised after the war, but retained National Service in order to maintain a viable establishment.

In terms of casualties, overall the British involvement in Palestine between September 1945 and June 1948 cost 754 Army personnel their lives, making it the fourth greatest loss of life for the British Army post Second World War. 1,443 died in Malaya, but over a period of twelve years, 1,441 in Northern Ireland over a period of thirty-eight years, and 1,129 died in Korea between June 1950 and July 1954. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission lists 997 deceased British service personnel between 1 January 1945 and 31 December 1947, although some of these died in accidents, drownings, or through illness and disease.

The embryonic United Nations was not able to bring about a solution to this growing crisis, with the government of the United States of America supporting Jewish migration, and a fragmented Arab response, the U.K. Government became increasingly isolated globally. Post-war, the U.K. was effectively bankrupt, having funded a total war economy since 1939, and with a new Labour Government in place, there was little political appetite in the U.K. for a long and costly deployment of British armed forces in Palestine. In early 1948, what was effectively a civil war broke out between the Arab and Jewish communities in Palestine, with many atrocities committed on both sides, as land was seized for Jewish settlements.

On 14 May 1948, the U.K. Government relinquished the mandate, the State of Israel came into being, and British Forces commenced withdrawing through the Port of Haifa. Almost immediately, war broke out between the new state of Israel and its surrounding Arab neighbours. H.Q. British Troops in Palestine closed in June 1948 and the British High Commissioner quietly withdrawn. In the early hours of 30 June 1948, elements from the 4th/7th Dragoon Guards, 1st Bn. Coldstream Guards and 1st Bn. Grenadier Guards withdrew from Haifa, leaving 40 Commando Royal Marines as the rearguard. They embarked on H.M.S. Striker by 10.00 hours, then Lieutenant General MacMILLAN, the last General Officer Commanding British Forces in Palestine gave the order to depart, and the British Forces presence in Palestine was over.

General Officer Commanding8th September 1936 – 20th September 1937¹Lieutenant General John Greer DILL, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., Col E. Lan R., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*19th August 1937 – 21st April 1938Lieutenant General Archibald P. WAVELL, C.B., C.M.G., M.C., *p.s.c.*²26th March 1938 – 11th August 1939

Lieutenant General Robert Hadden HAINING, C.B., D.S.O.

14th July 1939 – 5th March 1940

Lieutenant General Michael George Henry BARKER, C.B., D.S.O.

21st February 1940 – 26th June 1940Lieutenant General Sir George James GIFFARD, C.B., D.S.O., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*August 1940 – 26th February 1941

Lieutenant General Philip NEAME, V.C., C.B., D.S.O.

6th May 1941 – 19th October 1941 (To 9th Army)Lieutenant General Sir Henry Maitland WILSON, K.B.E., D.S.O., *p.s.c.***General Officer Commanding, British Troops in Palestine**16th October 1941 – 8th December 1944Major General (Acting) Douglas Fitzgerald McCONNEL, C.B.E., D.S.O., *p.s.c.*³5th November 1944 – 5th November 1945

Major General John Conyers D'ARCY, D.S.O., M.C.

General Officer Commanding6th November 1945 – April 1946

Lieutenant General John Conyers D'ARCY, D.S.O., M.C.

1st May 1946 – 31st January 1947Lieutenant General Sir Evelyn Hugh BARKER, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O., M.C., *p.s.c.*10th February 1947 – 30th June 1948

Lieutenant General Gordon Holmes Alexander MacMILLAN, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.**

General Staff Officer 1st Grade30th March 1937 – 25th April 1939Colonel Frank Keith SIMMONS, M.V.O., O.B.E., M.C., *p.s.c.*20th April 1939 – 21st February 1940Colonel Douglas Fitzgerald McCONNEL, D.S.O., *p.s.c.*

¹ The commencement date shown as 8 September 1936 in Churchill's Generals (ISBN 0 297 82066 4) and the Army List for April 1937, but 15 September 1936 in www.rafweb.org. It is possible DILL was appointed on 8 September and formally took up post on the 15th.

² WAVELL was promoted Lieutenant General on 29 January 1938 while in post.

³ Awarded the C.B. on 6 January 1944 for distinguished services in the Middle East.

Brigadier General Staff – (B.G.S.)

22nd February 1940 – 15th October 1941

Brigadier (Acting) Douglas Fitzgerald McCONNEL, D.S.O., *p.s.c.*

November 1945 – 1947

Brigadier (Temporary) James Rupert COCHRANE, R.A., *p.s.c.*

Chief of Staff

1947 – June 1948

Brigadier (Temporary) John Mather KIRKMAN, C.B.E., *p.s.c.*

Assistant Adjutant and Quarter-Master-General

13th January 1937 – 22nd September 1937

Colonel (Temporary) J. G. HALSTED, O.B.E., M.C., Loyal R., *p.s.c.*

23rd September 1937 – 6th October 1939

Colonel George Stephen BRUNSKILL, M.C., *p.s.c.*

Chief Administration Officer (Brigadier i/c Administration)

7th October 1939 – 1941

Brigadier (Acting) George Stephen BRUNSKILL, M.C., *p.s.c.*

Deputy Adjutant and Quarter-Master-General – (D.A. & Q.M.G.)

15th March 1941 – 19th October 1941 (to 9th Army)

Brigadier (Acting) William Richard BEDDINGTON, Bays, *p.s.c.*

28th January 1942 – 9th January 1944

Brigadier (Acting) Charles Morgan PATON, Essex R, *p.s.c.*

Brigadier Royal Artillery – (B.R.A.)

15th February 1941 – 31st October 1941 (to 9th Army)

Brigadier (Temporary) Christopher Peter Westby PERCEVAL, C.B.E., D.S.O., *g.*

Chief Engineer – (C.Eng.)

2nd September 1939 – 29th August 1940

Colonel Gilbert STREETON, O.B.E., M.C.

3rd October 1941 – 31st October 1941 (to 9th Army)

Brigadier (Temporary) Henry Porter Wolseley HUTSON, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.

23rd May 1943 – 22nd October 1944

Brigadier (Acting) Roy Victor CUTLER, M.B.E., M.C., R.E.

Deputy Chief Engineer, Palestine and Trans-Jordan18th May 1941 – 19th October 1941

Colonel (Acting) Roy Victor CUTLER, M.B.E., M.C., R.E.

Deputy Chief Engineer, Palestine20th October 1941 – 22nd May 1943

Colonel (Acting) Roy Victor CUTLER, M.B.E., M.C., R.E.

Chief Signal Officer – (C.S.O.)1937 – 1938/9

Major R. H. R. STEWARD, M.C., R. Signals.

21st June 1939 – 1941

Colonel (Local) William Charles Vernon GALWAY, M.C., R. Signals.

Assistant Director of Supplies and Transport – (A.D.S.T.)8th September 1936 – 1937/8

Colonel G. A. CAMPBELL, D.S.O.

Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport27 January 1943 – 19 March 1943

Brigadier (Acting) Philip Alexander ARDEN, C.B.E.

Assistant Director of Medical Services – (A.D.M.S.)1937 – 1939

Lieutenant Colonel A. HOOD, M.D., R.A.M.C.

Deputy Director of Medical Services – (D.D.M.S.)15th June 1939 – 25th February 1941

Colonel David Torquil Macleod LARGE, M.B.

9th March 1941 – 31st October 1941 (to 9th Army)[Brigadier \(Acting\) Edward Percival ALLMAN-SMITH, O.B.E., M.C., M.B.](#)18th October 1941 – 25th February 1942

Colonel (Acting) Richard Andrew AUSTIN, M.C., R.A.M.C.

Assistant Director of Ordnance Services – (A.D.O.S.)25th February 1939 – 1940/1

Colonel (Local) R. A. WEIR, R.A.O.C.

Deputy Director of Ordnance Services – (D.D.O.S.)

Chief Ordnance Mechanical Engineer1939 – 1940/1

Lieutenant Colonel J. F. X. MILLER, M.I.Mech.E., R.A.O.C.

Command Paymaster1937

Major C. N. BEDNALL, M.C., R.A.P.C.

1938

Major S. N. HILL, R.A.P.C.

12th January 1940 – 1940/1

Colonel (Acting) L. P. BRICKMAN, O.B.E., R.A.P.C.

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