

## **The First Casualty in Iraq (Part 1)**

Posted on [October 16, 2011](#) by [Russell Burgos](#)

The Obama administration is scrambling this weekend to put together a deal with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to [retain an American military presence](#) there after the end of the year. Iraq's Parliament this week refused to grant American troops immunity from prosecution in Iraqi courts, a customary protection in Status-of-Forces Agreements (SOFAs) and one that is well-established in international law. If the administration fails to come to terms with Mr. al-Maliki, other than the Marines who guard the United States Embassy the last American in uniform will leave Iraq within the next 10 weeks.

I thought it would be appropriate, therefore, to recall the story of the first American in uniform to lose his life in Iraq. Though Iraq is, of course, primarily a desert nation and has only 58 kilometers of coastline, the American was a naval officer, and he was killed there in 1941.

### **June 13, 1941: A Routine Hop**

It was the third time Royal Air Force Flying Officer (F/O) Gordon Arthur went through the preflight checklist that day. Stooping in the shade beneath his aircraft wings, F/O Arthur must have welcomed the brief respite from the Iraqi sun; though it was not yet officially summer, the day had been unrelentingly hot.

Arthur flew an Airspeed Oxford Mk I, the military version of a twin-engine commercial aircraft that had been designed and built by Airspeed, Ltd., of York, England. Airspeed had been founded by Nevil Shute Norway, an aeronautical engineer who is better known as a novelist, particularly for his very successful Cold War novel, *On the Beach*, which was made into a film starring Cary Grant and Ava Gardner in 1959.

Initially procured to train pilots for RAF Bomber Command, British and Commonwealth forces pressed the "Ox-box" into a wide variety of roles, from multi-engine trainer to coastal patrol aircraft to air ambulance.<sup>1</sup> In the three years since he'd earned his wings, Arthur had flown 125 hours in the Ox-box.<sup>2</sup>

Aircraft P.1942 had rolled off the Airspeed assembly line on November 28, 1939, and had been assigned to Number 4 Flying Training Squadron in Iraq on December 1, 1940, where the aircraft and Arthur saw action during the Anglo-Iraqi War of 1941. Though it was by no one's definition a combat aircraft, as part of the ambitiously named "Habbaniya Air Striking Force," Oxfords were fitted with improvised external bomb racks to enable them to drop 250-pound bombs on rebel Iraqi forces.<sup>3</sup>

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After an early morning departure from Royal Air Force Station Shaiba, an auxiliary airfield roughly 13 miles southwest of Basra, Arthur flew first to RAF Habbaniya, hub of Britain's combat operations against the forces of the nominally pro-fascist Golden Square, led by former Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani. From Habbaniya, Arthur then had a short hop to a small commercial airfield just across the Tigris River from Baghdad, where he was to pick up three passengers and return them to Basra later

that day: Messrs R.C. Harris, manager of the Ottoman Bank in Basra; Philip H.S. Tozer, sales manager for the Rafidian Oil Company of Baghdad; and James E.B. Souter, manager of the Basra branch of the Bank of Iran.<sup>4</sup>

At the last minute, however, a fourth passenger talked his way onto the aircraft, one who surely piqued the young aviator's curiosity. Not only was he an American, a rare sight in Iraq even in ordinary times, he was a naval officer — an odd duck indeed in a country with only 58 kilometers of coastline. The American was behind schedule and in a hurry, and not only did Iraq have few modern roads in 1941, RAF Intelligence judged them unsafe for travel by Westerners. Given the later indication that the American was aboard “by personal arrangement with the pilot,” it seems reasonable to conclude that F/O Arthur was happy to oblige him.<sup>5</sup>

A Naval Reservist recalled to active duty, Lieutenant Commander George Grove supervised the loading of his baggage, keeping with him the briefcase that contained the cryptographic codes he was required to use in his new assignment as United States Naval Observer at Bahrain.

Grove, who'd been delayed while awaiting transit and the outcome of the Anglo-Iraqi War, must have been pleased at his luck in grabbing a hop to Basra — and on Friday the 13th, no less. He'd certainly made a sensible decision, talking Arthur into carrying him for what should have been a relatively brief, 2-hour flight to Shaiba.

Unfortunately, it was also a decision that would cost him his life and would make Lieutenant Commander George Wilson Grove, USNR, the first uniformed American to fall in the line of duty in Iraq.

(continued in [Part 2](#))

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1. [back to post](#) John D.R. Rawlings, “The Airspeed Oxford,” in *Aircraft in Profile*, vol. 11, ed. Charles W. Cain (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972).
2. [back to post](#) Royal Air Force pilot's qualification record for Gordon W. Arthur, courtesy of Peter Burlton, Recording Secretary, Royal Air Force Habbaniya Association.
3. [back to post](#) A.G. Dudgeon, *Hidden Victory: The Battle of Habbaniya, May 1941* (Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: Tempus Publishing Ltd., 2000).
4. [back to post](#) Royal Air Force Incident Report, RAF Museum, Hendon, UK, courtesy of Peter Burlton, Recording Secretary, Royal Air Force Habbaniya Association.
5. [back to post](#) Sir Kinahan Cornwallis (British Ambassador) to Paul S. Knabenshue (American consul), enclosing report by Air Vice-Marshal John D'Albiac, Air Officer Commanding, RAF Shaiba, 30 July 1941, National Archives of the United States (NA), Record Group 84 (RG), Records of the American Legation, Baghdad, 102.5.

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