

The First Casualty in Iraq (Part 2)

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

(continued from [Part I](#))

A Looming Conflict

Within days of Germany's September 1, 1939, invasion of Poland, President Franklin D. Roosevelt began taking incremental steps that would gradually prepare the United States for conflict with the Axis powers:

- on September 4, he declared the so-called "Neutrality Patrol," which authorized enhanced maritime surveillance operations along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts;
- on September 8, he authorized an increase in the Navy and Marine Corps end-strength and the recall of Naval and Marine Corps Reserve and retired officers;
- on October 18, he barred any belligerent power's submarines from calling at U.S. ports;
- on November 4, he signed the Neutrality Act, which enabled the United States to sell weapons to Britain and France;
- in a speech at the University of Virginia on June 10, 1940, Roosevelt gave a subtle signal that America's strategic position vis-à-vis Germany was evolving, defining the U.S. to be a "non-belligerent" rather than a "neutral," essentially saying "we're not in this fight — yet;" and
- on September 17, 1940, FDR signed into law the [Selective Training and Service Act](#) — America's first peacetime draft — over the objections of a majority of House and Senate Republicans, whose opposition to Roosevelt's policies was steadily growing — in large part because they suspected him of trying to draw the country into the war in Europe.

One of the clearest signs that FDR expected the U.S. would soon be at war with the Axis, at least to those who would have been privy to the then-highly classified program, was a 1940 directive attaching American military and naval officers to British forces on active service worldwide.⁵

These "United States Naval Observers" were de facto intelligence operatives, and their mission was to learn as much as possible about the tactics and technologies of Axis forces and the tactics, techniques, and procedures used by Commonwealth forces against them.

Roosevelt faced a challenging domestic political environment. The year 1940 was a presidential election year, and no president had ever run for a third term. Newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune* were ardent foes, and the overt, rank partisanship displayed on a daily basis in American newspapers of the era — particularly those two — would silence any politician complaining in 2011 about "media bias." Perhaps most challenging was public opinion itself — not only were there openly pro-fascist groups like the Silver Legion and the German-American Bund, the Communist Party and socialist parties had grown in reaction to the Great Depression, and there was strong anti-war sentiment in churches, "mother's leagues," and the America First committees.

For political reasons, therefore, though the administration could tell the press that Americans were “observing” foreign conflicts — a familiar practice since at least the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 — there were strong political incentives to avoid mentioning the likelihood that they would be put into harm’s way.



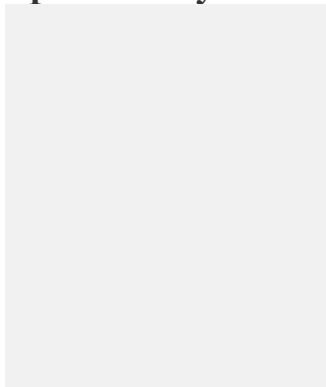
USMC Brig. Gen. James Roosevelt

For example, an American Naval Observer, Lieutenant Joseph Wellings, was aboard HMS *Rodney* on May 27, 1941, when she and HMS *King George V*, along with the cruisers *Norfolk* and *Dorsetshire*, closed with and sunk the German battleship, *Bismarck*,⁶ and another, United States Marine Captain James “Jimmy” Roosevelt — the President’s son — was strafed near Fallujah by fighters attached to *Fliegerführer Irak*, a Luftwaffe element dispatched by Hitler to support the rebel uprising.⁷ Roosevelt, who had been carrying personal messages from his father to various Arab heads-of-state, was also gathering commando tactics, techniques, and procedures to apply to the new Marine Raiders training program.⁸

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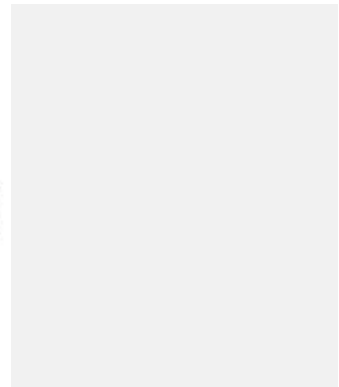


George Wilson Grove

Woodbury, New Jersey

“George”

Manager Lacrosse Team; Lacrosse
Numerals; Choir (4, 3, 2, 1); Masquerades
(4, 3, 2, 1); Log Staff; Lucky Bag Staff;
Reiss (3); Leader Glee Club.



Naval Academy Yearbook 1915

Lieutenant Commander George Grove was a 1915 graduate of the United States Naval Academy, where (according to the Academy yearbook) he earned a reputation for being a bit of a rake. Grove, who managed the lacrosse team and glee club, “certainly loved the ladies,” who “always...held a tender spot in George’s heart” — a quality that appears to have landed him in some trouble during his “youngster” (or sophomore) year at the Academy, as he was assigned to the “crew” of the USS *Reina Mercedes*.

Formerly a Spanish warship, the *Reina Mercedes* had been sunk by the battleships USS *Massachusetts* and *Texas* at the Battle of Santiago Bay during the Spanish-American War. After the war, she was raised to clear the harbor channels and put into service in Annapolis as the midshipmen’s brig. *The Lucky Bag* noted with some satisfaction, however, that Grove’s minor incarceration did little to dull his enthusiasm; he was, the yearbook noted, “the only man who gave a speech at the Class Supper. His subject? ‘The Ladies,’ of course!”⁹

After serving in destroyers during World War I, Grove left active duty in November 1920 to pursue a civilian business career. On October 5, 1940, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox authorized the involuntary recall to active duty of 5,000 Naval Reservists, joining the 5,000 already on active duty. Leaving behind a wife and two sons in Rhode Island, Grove reported first to the Navy Department in Washington. He was posted to Manila, pending British approval of his assignment in Bahrain. Because Britain was historically the preeminent power in the Persian Gulf, and because the U.S. was not a belligerent in the conflict in the Mideast, diplomatic protocol gave London the right-of-refusal over the presence of any non-Allied military personnel in its areas of operation — especially those who would be performing “special duty.”

On March 29, 1941, the Secretary of State notified the American legation in Baghdad — the U.S. did not yet have full diplomatic relations with Iraq — that London had approved Grove’s assignment.¹⁰ The Minister-Resident (a legation did not rate an ambassador), Paul S. Knabenshue, was advised to expect Grove’s arrival and was given instructions for facilitating Grove’s mission.

Grove’s mission was to observe British anti-submarine operations in the Indian Ocean and gather intelligence on U-boat operations and the tactics, techniques, and procedures used to defeat them. With Britain’s position in the Middle East in jeopardy, Grove was also likely expected to maintain information on military operations east of the Suez Canal, then under threat by German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel’s *Deutsches Afrikakorps*.

Now that there was to be an official United States naval presence in the Gulf, the Chief of Naval Operations soon advised Knabenshue there were other Naval Intelligence operatives in his area of responsibility, reservists whose cover was employment with the California Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC), predecessor of the Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco).¹¹

Since the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, there had been recurring Anglo-American diplomatic and economic scuffling over the question of Middle East oil. It would not be surprising, therefore, if Grove also had a secondary purpose in Bahrain — keeping watch over America’s new friend, Saudi King Abdul-Aziz, an activity that likely also occupied much of the time of CASOC’s undercover Naval Intelligence officers.

(continued in [Part 3](#))

5. [back to post](#) Samuel Eliot Morrison, *History of United States Navy Operations in World War II, vol.1, The Battle of the Atlantic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1947), p. 12.
6. [back to post](#) Phyllis L. Soybel, *A Necessary Relationship: The Development of Anglo-American Cooperation in Naval Intelligence* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005).
7. [back to post](#) Robert Lyman, *Iraq 1941: The Battles for Basra, Habbaniya, Fallujah, and Baghdad* (NY: Osprey Publishing, 2006), p. 96.
8. [back to post](#) "With Roosevelt in Iraq," *Time Magazine*, June 2, 1941; James A. Thorpe, "The United States and the 1940-1941 Anglo-Iraqi Crisis: American Policy in Transition," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Winter 1971), pp. 79-89.
9. [back to post](#) Corps of Midshipmen, *The Lucky Bag 1915* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Academy, 1915), p. 89.
10. [back to post](#) Secretary of State to Knabenshue (Baghdad), Telegram 470, March 29, 1941, NA RG 84, 102.5.
11. [back to post](#) Chief of Naval Operations to Knabenshue (Baghdad), Telegram 470, September 21, 1941, NA RG 84, 102.5.

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