

## **The First Casualty in Iraq (Part 3)**

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

(continued from [Part 2](#))

Britain's quick victory over the forces aligned with the Golden Square restored the Hashemite monarchy and prevented Iraq from falling under the sway of the Axis, but it did little to ameliorate the economic, political, and structural factors in Iraqi civil society and politics that would lead first to the 1958 revolution and then to the Ba'ath Party *coups d'état* of the 1960s — and ultimately to the Saddam Hussein regime. Paul S. Knabenshue was well aware of the ferment that lay just below the illusory stability created by the presence of British troops in Baghdad. He'd experienced uprisings in other parts of the Middle East and knew that the way they ended seldom resolved the conditions that produced them. He'd been appalled by the wanton, almost gleeful, destruction of Baghdad's Jewish community during the *Farhud*, a pogrom that erupted in the wake of Britain's ouster of Rashid Ali's National Defence Government, and had every reason to believe that conditions were ripe for further unrest. Knabenshue had a good ear for the politics of what today is called the "Arab Street." Formerly an officer in the Consular Service of the Department of State, he and his wife, Catherine, had spent most of their lives in the region. Before it was merged with the regular Foreign Service, the Consular Service had provided diplomatic representation in regional posts that were of less significance than capital cities. Because it tended to attract men from the middle and upper-middle classes, particularly Midwesterners, many Consular officials endured the genteel snobbery of the Eastern seaboard elites who comprised much of the regular Foreign Service.<sup>12</sup>

Knabenshue was born in Toledo, Ohio, in 1883. His father, Samuel, published the *Toledo Blade*, a newspaper that in the fashion of the era wore its partisanship on its sleeve and was a reliable tribune for solid Middle West Republicanism. Samuel joined the Consular Service late in life — brief stints of diplomatic service were considered a fashionable demonstration that a man had had a successful professional life — and was posted to Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Paul's first posting was also in Belfast, where he met and married Catherine — known to nearly everyone by her nickname, "Olive." Their Irish sojourn was a brief one, however, and the Knabenshues spent their professional life in the Mideast, with postings in Beirut, Cairo, and Jerusalem before Paul's final assignment to Baghdad in 1932. In Baghdad, Knabenshue took up residence in the old American Legation (known to Baghdadis as the "White House on the Tigris"), where he oversaw the slowly growing U.S.-Iraqi relationship, signing the first official trade treaty between the two countries in 1938.

By virtue of its paramount role in Iraqi politics, Britain's ambassador was the senior member of the diplomatic community, and he and his staff considered Knabenshue to be rather provincial, holding him in mild disdain for his inability to entertain properly — though entertaining was difficult indeed, owing to the penurious conditions under which American diplomats were operating in the early years of the Great Depression.

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Nevertheless, the Knabenshues were popular fixtures on the diplomatic party circuit, and Paul appears to have been particularly respected by a number of Iraqi politicians. His ability to read Arab politics generally, and Iraqi politics specifically, was especially admired, even by [Dr. Fritz Grobba](#), a well-known and highly knowledgeable German Arabist who, while serving in Baghdad's German embassy, fed a constant stream of Nazi propaganda to Baghdad media and organized anti-British Fifth Column activities. Thanks to his courageous actions during the Rashid Ali coup, however, even those who'd looked down their noses at Knabenshue before the Anglo-Iraqi War were unreserved in their admiration for him afterwards.

### **The Iraqi Coup**

Installed by Britain on the newly created Iraqi throne in August 1921, King Feisal I died in Switzerland in September 1933, where he'd gone to seek treatment for his failing health; Ghazi, Feisal's eldest son, succeeded him on the throne. Particularly fond of high-powered sports cars, and with a reputation as both a playboy and an Arab nationalist, Ghazi's reign was cut short in 1939, when he was killed after wrapping his car around a Baghdad street lamp. Because Ghazi's son, the future King Feisal II, was then only three years-old, Ghazi's cousin and brother-in-law, Prince Abd al-illah, was made Regent.<sup>13</sup>

The Iraqi *coup d'etat* was led by four army officers who called themselves the "Golden Square." The coup began on April 1, 1941, with former Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, who had resigned his post under pressure from the Regent eight weeks earlier, slated to become head-of-government. As the historian Charles Tripp points out, Rashid Ali was initially very concerned with maintaining the appearance of legality, establishing his so-called "Government of National Defence" to suggest that Iraq's very existence had been under threat.

Before relinquishing its control of the Iraq Mandate and Iraq's admission to the League of Nations as an independent country, Britain had locked in treaty rights allowing it to move military forces through the Royal Air Force base at Habbaniya, and London invoked that right shortly after the coup — and Rashid Ali agreed. However, his fellow conspirators rejected his decision, and shortly after the Iraqi military demanded that Britain give up its position; as a result, British forces began combat operations on May 2, 1941.

Knabenshue provided the British with a key piece of intelligence: at midnight on April 29, he observed an unusual degree of activity by Iraqi armored and infantry troops, who were moving out in the direction of RAF Habbaniyah. Passing the information to a British intelligence officer, Knabenshue's warning gave the Royal Air Force three hours' notice to prepare for hostilities.

When combat broke out between the British and Iraqis, a large number of British citizens found they were cut off from their embassy and in danger of reprisal on the streets of Baghdad. Knabenshue notified Iraqi authorities that he intended to extend the protection of the Stars and Stripes to all British non-combatants and took 140 Britons into the Legation grounds, an act widely recognized to have prevented "considerable loss of life."<sup>14</sup>



Prince Abd al-Allah visits Mount Vernon, 1945

Knabenshue's greatest contribution was rescuing the Regent himself. Disguised as a woman (knowing no Iraqi soldier would dare molest a female) and unable to reach the British embassy, Abd al-Allah appeared at the American Legation on the morning of April 2, 1941. Knabenshue and Olive smuggled him to RAF Habbaniya in the back seat of Knabenshue's Legation car, hidden beneath a blanket.<sup>15</sup> Knabenshue and the Legation staff also had several close calls during the *Farhud* on June 1 and 2, 1941; a junior Legation officer rescued several Americans at the risk of his own life — and brought Knabenshue's car back to the motor pool adorned with fresh bullet holes as souvenirs.<sup>16</sup>

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Driving Grove to the airfield just two months later, Knabenshue provided the naval officer with a letter of introduction to Royal Navy Commodore C.M. Graham, Officer-in-Charge at Basra (with whom Grove was to dine that evening), who would ensure Grove had onward transportation to Bahrain, and with contact information for the American consulate at Basra, where Grove would be billeted and where Basra's small American expatriate community would be hosting a dinner in his honor.

### **A Short Hop**

Though it was nearly 6:00 p.m. by the time Grove's baggage was loaded, the temperature was still near 120 degrees Fahrenheit, and Flying Officer (F/O) Arthur had some trouble starting the Oxford's engines — not uncommon in the Iraqi heat.

Because Grove was the only other uniformed officer aboard the aircraft, and because Grove outranked him (a Royal Air Force Flying Officer is roughly equivalent to Lieutenant (junior grade) in the US Navy), F/O Arthur probably offered him the co-pilot's seat as a goodwill gesture; though it had twin controls, the Oxford was operated as a single-pilot aircraft. The Iraqi desert, unbroken except for the palm groves along the

Tigris, must have seemed terribly bleak to someone far more accustomed to the forests of Connecticut and Rhode Island than to the deserts of the Arabian peninsula.

The flight to RAF Shaiba should have taken less than two hours. By 1940 hours, night had fallen and a growing sandstorm obscured many of the physical reference points pilots would have used as navigational aids. In 1938, the year that Gordon earned his pilot's wings, the Royal Air Force training syllabus included less than ten hours' night flying — and even that under artificially illuminated conditions.<sup>17</sup> P.1942 never arrived.

On June 18, 1941, the *New York Times* published a brief notice: “U.S. Navy Flier Missing in R.A.F. Plane in Iraq” (the *Times*' confusion over Grove's status was likely due to the fact that he had been flying at the time of his disappearance). Two weeks after Arthur, Grove, and the three civilians were reported overdue, a Bedouin notified a local police official that he'd come across some aircraft wreckage, roughly ten miles west of Jebel Sanam. There the Royal Air Force investigators found the Oxford and the men's remains.

Lieutenant Commander George Wilson Grove, USNR, became the first uniformed American lose his life in the line of duty in Iraq. He would not be the last.

(concludes in [Postscript](#))

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12. [back to post](#) Charles Stuart Kennedy, *The American Consul: A History of the United States Consular Service, 1776-1914* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1990).

13. [back to post](#) Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 78-9, 96.

14. [back to post](#) Thorpe, “United States and the Anglo-Iraqi Crisis,” p. 87.

15. [back to post](#) Knabenshue to Secretary of State, Telegram 54, April 2, 1941, in *Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers 1941: The British Commonwealth, the Near East, and Africa* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1942), pp. 491-2.

16. [back to post](#) Thorpe, “United States and the Anglo-Iraqi Crisis,” p. 87.

17. [back to post](#) Air Ministry, *R.A.F. Standard Syllabus for Civil and Service Flying Training Schools*, Air Publication 1388, July 1938, courtesy of Royal Air Force Museum, London.

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