

The First Iraq Casualty (Postscript)

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

(continued from [Part 3](#))

From the Potomac to the Tigris

The Royal Air Force investigating officer completed his report a month later. It offers few insights, since wartime accident investigations were relatively cursory, the aircraft was heavily damaged in the crash, and Bedouin had stripped the wreckage of anything they thought useful.

The investigating officer concluded that F/O Arthur had become disoriented by the darkness and the dust clouds raised by the early summer *shamal*.¹⁸

The Oxford had a nasty habit of yawing — turning from side-to-side along its vertical axis — and pilots were not able to correct it by trimming the aircraft.¹⁹ Squadron Leader Tony Dudgeon, who'd commanded No. 244 Flying Training Squadron (the "Habbaniya Air Striking Force") during the uprising, had personally modified his Oxfords with field-expedient bomb racks, and he noted in his memoirs of the campaign that the modification — which had not been approved by the Air Ministry — made the Oxford "a bit awkward to fly at low speeds" and "unstable with some very startling and inexplicable twitches."²⁰

The investigator's conclusion meets the common-sense test: assuming Arthur had been circling, turning, or rocking his wings to try and spot the airfield, given the Oxford's tendency to yaw, the additional handling "twitches" associated with its field-expedient bomb racks, or even pilot disorientation from trying to distinguish sky from desert in the middle of a sandstorm, it seems probable that the aircraft departed controlled flight or that Arthur simply flew it into the ground.

While there was no evidence they'd been pilfered, the Office of Naval Intelligence ordered the ciphers Grove carried to be destroyed throughout the fleet as a security precaution. The enlisted yeoman who'd been assigned to assist him at Bahrain was still cooling his heels in Bombay, waiting for transport, and so was ordered to secure Grove's personal belongings and prepare them to be forwarded to Grove's widow, Katherine, and his sons. Royal Navy Commodore Graham sent Knabenshue a brief letter of condolence and asked that he forward it to Grove's wife; though he'd never met Grove, Graham wrote to Knabenshue, he felt the widow might be comforted by a letter "from some Naval associate."

It is sadly ironic that the first American service member to lose his life in Iraq, a country with only 58 kilometers of coastline, was a naval officer.

Lieutenant Commander George W. Grove, USNR, was recovered by British forces on Independence Day, July 4, 1941, and buried a day later in the British Imperial War Graves Cemetery at Basra, attended by an honor guard and firing party from HMS *Seabelle*, a converted yacht that served as Graham's flagship, with "Taps" sounded by buglers of the Assyrian Levies.

The British cemetery is still there, and though British forces in Iraq since 2003 have made efforts to maintain it, the desert is slowly claiming the graves it still holds. This photograph of the row of graves where Grove was buried was taken in 2009.

The American consul, the British consul, senior officers from the Royal Air Force, Royal Indian Navy, and British army, as well as mourners from America's expatriate community in Basra, were also in attendance. Memorial services for Grove and the other men were held in Basra's St. Peter's Church and Baghdad's St. George's Mesopotamian Memorial Church.

Business being business, the British consul at Basra presented Knabenshue with a bill for nine Iraqi dinars to cover the cost of Grove's coffin.

Commander Grove was replaced by a newly commissioned Lieutenant (junior grade), Derwood W. Lockard. Lockard, a young professor in Harvard's Anthropology Department, was a veteran of archaeological expeditions to Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, and after the war would return to Harvard, where he would ultimately become Associate Director of the Center for Middle East Studies.

Lockard decided to stand-up the Naval Observer office in Basra, rather than Bahrain, since a United States Army Signal Corps element was already there, setting up shop in support of Persian Gulf Command, a logistics and services command that was part of the Lend-Lease supply chain through Iran to the Soviet Union.²¹

In a cruel twist of fate, Paul S. Knabenshue himself would die not long after Grove, contracting tetanus during a surgical procedure. He was the second American diplomat to die at his post in Iraq; the first, Charles F. Brissel, died in Baghdad in 1916, having also performed significant services on behalf of British forces at war in Iraq.

Because Paul's wife, Olive, had never actually set foot in the United States, she was denied permission to emigrate to America after her husband's death. Several of Knabenshue's successors intervened on her behalf over the decades, all to no avail. It is believed she died in obscurity in Great Britain.

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When Paul's brother, Roy, died in 1960, he was memorialized at the Portal of Folded Wings at the Valhalla Memorial Park in North Hollywood, California. Roy had been one of America's pioneer aviators, flying a dirigible in the first airshow ever held in the US, the 1910 [International Air Meet](#) in Los Angeles. Formerly the manager of the Wright Brothers' aircraft factory, Roy helped found the Southern California aerospace industry that contributed so much to America's defense during and after World War II. He is often mentioned in books recounting the early days of American aviation. Paul, by contrast, has been nearly forgotten to history.

A Final Hop

Though he'd gone from the Potomac to the Tigris, Lieutenant Commander Grove had one more journey to make. At the direction of his eldest son, who was himself then a midshipman at the Naval Academy, Grove's remains were exhumed in 1946. In correspondence we exchanged, Captain George S. Grove (USN, ret.) wrote he'd decided his father should be interred with his countrymen at the [North Africa American Military Cemetery and Memorial](#) in Carthage, Tunisia, and it is there that one can pay respects to Lieutenant Commander George W. Grove, USNR, the first American in uniform to lose his life in Iraq: plot G, row 16, grave 8. ²²
Requiescat in pace

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18. [back to post](#) Investigation No. 58 (A) Fatal, Air Ministry Form 1180, courtesy of Air Historical Branch, Royal Air Force Northolt, Ruslip, Middlesex, UK
 19. [back to post](#) Bill Gunston, *Classic World War II Aircraft Cutaways* (London: Osprey Publishing, 1995).
 20. [back to post](#) Dudgeon, *Hidden Victory*, p. 41.
 21. [back to post](#) T.H. Vail Motter, *The Persian Corridor and Aid to Russia*, in *United States Army in World War II, The Middle East Theater*, Center for Military History Publication 8-1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1952).
 22. [back to post](#) Author's personal communication with Captain George S. Grove, United States Navy (retired).

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