

Iraqi militia units in British service, 1915-1955

Introduction

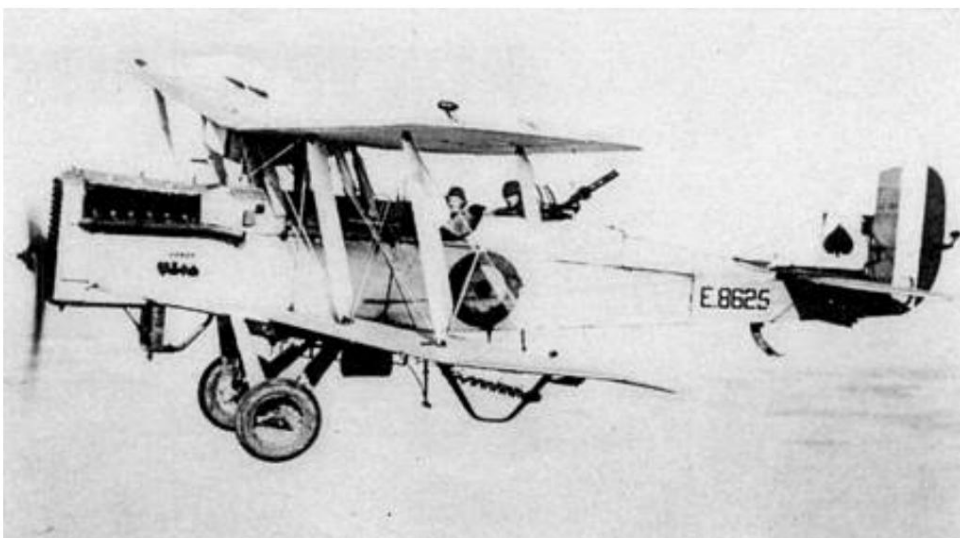


Rolls-Royce armored car from an RAF armored car unit, Middle East, 1930s 2). —

The First World War really helped promote the development of e.g. aircraft and motor vehicles. These new technological possibilities enabled the Royal Air Force to develop a concept whereby, with the help of air forces and smaller units (including armored vehicles) on land, it was possible to control large geographical areas.

In the period after the First World War, when the economy was tight, the concept constituted an affordable alternative to the traditional deployment of land military units in the colonies, and thereby gave England the opportunity to, among other things, to control the large areas of land in the Middle East which before the war had been part of the Ottoman Empire.

Control from the air



*De Havilland 9A, fra No. 84 Squadron, RAF, Shaiba, Irak, 1926 1).*__

The concept of "control from the air" (*air control*) was developed by Air Marshal Hugh Trenchard [3](#)) as one of the means of maintaining the Royal Air Force as part of the armed forces after the war. The battles in Somaliland [4](#)) showed that the concept worked in practice, and not least thanks to the efforts of 12 airplanes, they managed to end 20 years of fighting against a fierce enemy in three weeks.

As one of the results of the peace negotiations after the First World War, England took over the mandate area of Mesopotamia in October 1920 with a view to making the country independent; this happened in October 1932, when Iraq became an independent member of the League of Nations.

The English rule was met from the start by resistance from parts of the population and it quickly became apparent that there was a need for the presence of very large land military units from the British and Indian army, an opportunity that the limited financial means did not allow.

In 1920, 25,000 British and 80,000 Indian soldiers were stationed in Iraq, and this force was to be reduced to 4,000 British and 10,000 Indian soldiers.

Inspired by the events in Somaliland, the Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, now asked the Chief of the Royal Air Force, Hugh Trenchard, to develop a plan for how the Royal Air Force could control Iraq.

During a conference in Cairo in March 1921, it was decided to hand over military control of Iraq to the Royal Air Force, and in 1922 eight squadrons were stationed in Iraq, distributed over three airfields.

One of the units that worked together with the Royal Air Force, and among others guarding the three airfields from 1932 were *The Iraq Levies*.

Iraq Levies



Regimentsmärke - Iraq Levies.
From Source 7.

The origins of *Iraq Levies* are found in a number of smaller mounted units - i.a. *Muntafiq Horse* and *Arab Scouts* - who were recruited in 1915 and 1916 as scouts for British units and bodyguards for officials in what was then Mesopotamia.

In line with the English occupation of Mesopotamia, several native units were recruited to secure supply lines etc. and these units are assembled in 1919, as a kind of paramilitary police force, under the name *Iraq Levies* [5](#)).

Until 1932, the corps primarily operated in the troubled northern part of the British mandate area of Mesopotamia, which in 1932 became the Kingdom of Iraq.

After this, the corps' tasks were changed to primarily include guarding British airfields in Iraq, which remained the corps' main task until its disbandment in 1955. Already from 1922, however, the force was subordinate to the Royal Air Force, which had then taken over control of Mesopotamia.

The effort from 1915 to 1932 is described in Source 7, which gives an impression of the period's manifold unrest in northern Iraq (Kurdistan).

Organisation, 1922

In the beginning, the personnel consisted of Arabs, but later also included Kurds, Assyrians and Iraqi Turkmen, to finally consist almost entirely of Assyrians [6](#).

Table 1: Iraq Levies, October 1922	Number of Comments
3 cavalry regiments (Each cavalry regiment consisted of 457 men.)	1,410 1st and 3rd Cavalry Regiments - Kurds and Iraqi Turkmen; 2nd Cavalry Regiment - Kurds and Assyrians.
4 infantry battalions (This infantry battalion consisted of 701 men.)	3.248 1st Infantry Battalion - March Arabs; 2. and 3. Infanteribataljon - Assyrians; 4. Infanteribataljon - kurdere.
1 machine gun company (Vickers machine guns)	210
1 mountain battery	Assyrians.
Educational unit	173 In addition, a sanitation element and a transport element were included.
Total	5.041



*Menig cavalry, Iraq Levies.
The soldier is a Turkmen from Abil.*



*Many an Infantryman, Iraq Levies.
Soldiers er en armenier fraTkhoma.*

The illustrations are from the book *The Assyrians and their Neighbors* by WA Wigram, G. Bells & Sons, London 1929, seen for sale at Ctesiphon.

In its heyday (May 1922), the corps included 6,199 men, but gradually a gradual reduction was initiated, parallel to the building up of the Iraqi army.



Iraq Levies, 1927.
From Source 7.

Later development

The machine gun company was equipped with medium heavy machine guns of the Vickers type; the mule in the photograph carries such a machine gun.

Until 1946, the officers [7](#)) and parts of the [non-commissioned officer corps](#) came from the British army, with a touch of local officers and non-commissioned officers. In 1946, the corps was attached to the Royal Air Force Regiment, after which officers and non-commissioned officers now came from here.

The strength target per 1 April 1933 was 1,250 men, and in 1937 the corps included seven companies - four Assyrian, two Arab and one Kurdish company.

During the Second World War, the force expanded considerably and in 1942-3 - when the corps officially became part of the Royal Air Force - included as many as 40 companies deployed to guard airfields throughout the Middle East.

Another company was trained as paratroopers - 1st Parachute Company. This company was deployed in Albania (from Italy) and Greece in 1944, although it was not parachuted. The company numbered 200 men, organized into three infantry platoons and one mortar platoons. Read more about the parachute company's efforts in Albania and Greece here: [The Battle of Sarande \(Albania\)](#) and [Street fighting in Athens](#). Both articles are part of [Source 8](#).

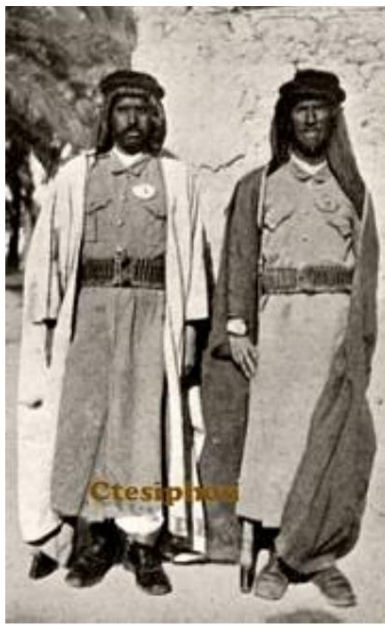
In May 1955, the last British units were withdrawn from Iraq, and a parade involving the Iraq Levies and Iraqi Army soldiers on 2 May 1955 marked the end of the corps.

Read more about the end of the story in [The Assyrian Levies, The Final Chapter \(Solomon \(Sawa\) Solomon\)](#). Approx. a third of the personnel subsequently joined the Iraqi army.

Uniformization



Iraq Levies, 1915.



Iraq Levies, 1915.



Iraq Levies, 1917.

From Source 7.

An actual uniform was introduced in 1916. As uniform trousers, you could choose between breeches and shorts, but the Arab soldiers found it undignified - and against all custom - to have to bare their legs in that way.

As a compromise, it was decided that the soldiers could wear a robe over the uniform. During 1917, however, the soldiers got used to wearing uniform in a more ordinary way, and the tunic went out of use.

The headdress was changed to a gathered felt hat, probably in connection with the recruitment of Assyrian soldiers.

The 1927 photograph also shows a low fur cap (the mounted soldier and the coachman), a headgear also known from *The Trans-Jordan Frontier Force* (see Player's Cigarette Card No. 47 in the series *Military Uniforms of the British Empire Overseas*, 1938) and police units in the Middle East.



*Royal Air Force Levies (Iraq),
Sergeant, Egypt 1944.
From Source 10.*

When the Iraq Levies became part of the Royal Air Force in 1943, the Air Force's shoulder badge, an eagle with spread wings, was also introduced. The badge can be seen in the illustration on the right, in the red version which belonged to the troop uniform of the Royal Air Force.

The Battle of Habbaniya, May 1941

The event which may have secured a lasting memory *for Iraq Levies* in posterity is the fighting for Habbaniya airfield (about 90 km west of Baghdad) [8](#) from 1 to 6 May 1941. —

Here, British air forces and 1,199 men from the Iraq Levies as well as 364 men from the 1st Battalion King's Own (Royal Lancaster Regiment) defended themselves against an attack from large forces of the Iraqi army.

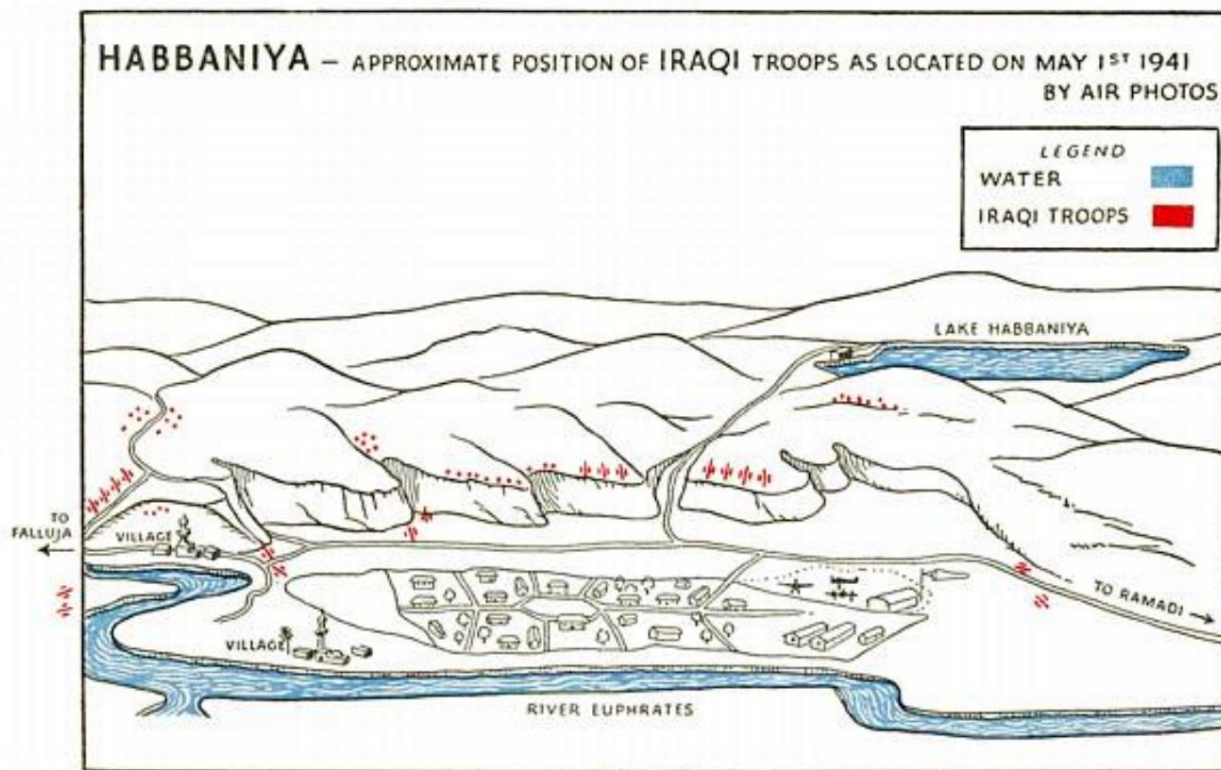
In addition, 18 Rolls-Royce armored cars (three platoons) from No. 1 Armored Car Company Royal Air Force, in the defense force.

Background (Excerpt from *Historic Battles, Habbaniya, World War II, 1941*)

The overwhelming victories for the Axis powers at the beginning of the war produced in March 1941 the formation of a pro-German government in Iraq under Rashid Ali [9](#)). The rightful Iraqi regent, Emir Abdul-Ilah, fled to the protection of a British warship at Basra, a port city on the Persian Gulf. To protect their treaty rights, the British landed a brigade from India [10](#)) at Basra on 18 April. —

Rashid Ali then attacked the British air base at Habbaniya, 65 km west of Baghdad, on 2 May.

The attackers numbered about 9,000 men, equipped with 50 cannons [11](#)). To defend the airfield, Major-General (*Air Vice-Marshal*) Smart had only about 250 British infantry, 1,000 Royal Air Force personnel and about 1,000 native troops [12](#)). —



The airfield at Habbaniya, seen from the north [13](#).

The isolated garrison had no artillery and was further hampered by the need to protect 9,000 civilians. But the decisive element proved to be Royal Air Force aircraft, which kept the Iraqis under frequent attack and eventually silenced their artillery.

After four days of siege, Rashid Ali's troops began to retreat. The British force immediately counter-attacked and took 400 prisoners and much equipment. On May 7, the Iraqis fell back across the Euphrates River to Al Falluja. The defenders of Habbaniya, now reinforced with two motorized brigades from Haifa (present-day Israel), launched their attack on 19 May, capturing Al Falluja and driving into Baghdad on 30 May. Rashid Ali fled the country and the regent resumed control of the government the next day...

Iraq Levies

On 30 April 1941, the Iraq Levies numbered 1,199 men: 17 British officers, 5 British NCOs, 3 NCOs and 40 Assyrian officers and 1,134 men. In addition to the soldiers, their families were also at the air station.

The force was organized into: Staff and staff company, 1st - 4th (Assyrian) infantry companies, 8th (Kurdish) infantry company and a composite infantry company. In addition, a machine gun platoon, a mortar platoon and an anti-tank rifle group were included; the latter is mentioned in Source 8 in connection with the 4th (Assyrian) Company.

RAF Habbaniya - No. 4 Service Flying Training School

The machines at the air station in Habbaniya were far from the latest type, and no one probably imagined that they would be used for anything other than educational purposes.

The flying school had 79 machines of various types before the operations started, but only 35 pilots could be mustered into the improvised flying department - *The Habbaniya Air Striking Force*.

Type (from Source 11)	Quantity
Hawker Audax	32
Fairey Gordon	8
Airspeed Oxford	29
Gloster Gladiator	9
Bristol Blenheim I	1
Total	79

The head of the school, Colonel (Group Captain) Saville, commanded the flying department in four squadrons, which were organized as follows: A Squadron: 10 Hawker Audax; B Squadron: 1 Bristol Blenheim, 26 Airspeed Oxfords, 8 Fairey Gordons and 4 Gloster Gladiators and C and D Squadron: 10 Hawker Audax each.



Hawker Audax.



Fairey Gordon.

From Source 11.



Airspeed Oxford.



Gloster Gladiator.

The machines were equipped so that each Fairey Gordon and Hawker Audax could carry 2 pcs. 125 kg bombs, while the Airspeed Oxford machines could carry 8 pcs. 10 kg bombs. The best students at the flying school were enlisted as pilots, while observers and gunners were recruited from among the other personnel on the base.

No. 37 Squadron and No. 70 Squadron, Royal Air Force



Vickers Wellesley. Vickers Wellesley (Wikipedia).

As a supplement to the flying school, 18 bombers of the Vickers Wellesley type came from No. 37 Squadron and No. 70 Squadron, which was stationed in Shaibah., near Basra.

The total number of machines thus came to 97.

Sources 11 and 12 describe the efforts of the flying units, but not all organizational details agree. Source 11 in particular contains a very detailed description of the individual missions.

Iraqi units

Paradoxically, the Iraqi army and air force were trained by the English and to some extent equipped with British equipment and uniforms of the English model. Until the pro-German takeover, an English military commission, headed by Major General GG Waterhouse, had been attached to the Iraqi defense.



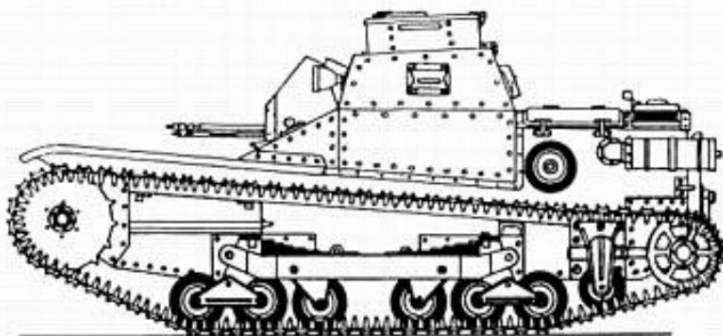
Iraqi soldiers, 1942.

Fra Cascos of the 20th Century (Joseba Revuelta).

The forces besieging Habbaniya consisted of:

- One infantry brigade and two motorized battalions
- Two artillery divisions (12 3.7-inch howitzers and 12 18-pounder field guns and 4 4.5-inch howitzers)
- 12 armored vehicles
- (possibly Crossley)
- A motorized machine gun company A
- motorized telegraph company
- An anti-aircraft and anti-tank battery
- A number of tanks.

The Iranian army of the [period 14](#)), not to mention its armored units, are not among the most well-described subjects.



Ansaldo tank.

Source unknown.

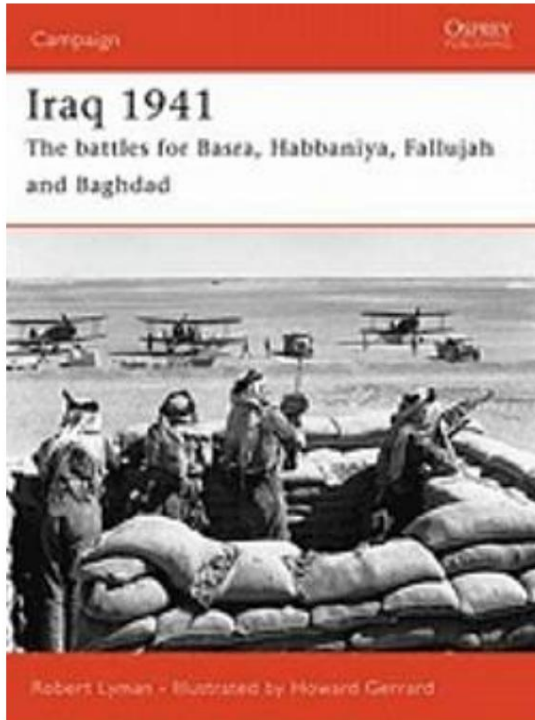
Iraqi Tanks (Tanks!) mentions that the Iraqi army had Italian tanks of the type Ansaldo (perhaps 16) and three-axle British armored vehicles of the type Crossley [15](#)).

The number of armored cars is not known, but 10 were captured after the fighting at Habbaniya.

A Slovak website contains renderings of a Czech LT vz 38 tank [Pz 38(t)] in Iraqi

service, but the further details are not known. See Praga LT vz.38 szine profile lock.

Closing



Earlier this year, a book was published in the Ospreys Campaign series - *Iraq 1941 - The battles for Basra, Habbaniya, Fallujah and Baghdad* - which gives an excellent overview of the events in Iraq in May 1941. The book (Source 13) focuses, for good reasons, on the big image, but also mentions the efforts of the volunteer Iraqi units.

Iraq 1941 - The battles for Basra, Habbaniya, Fallujah and Baghdad

Author: Robert Lyman; illustrations: Howard Gerrard.

Format: The familiar from Osprey's special series. 96 pages, 70+ photographs, maps and drawings.

Publisher: Osprey Campaign No. 165, London 2006 [16](#)), ISBN [1-84176-991-2](#).

Price: £13.99. (However, can be obtained at about half price [via Abebooks](#).)

Sources

1. British Air Control: A Model for the Application of Air Power in Low-Intensity Conflict? af kaptajn David Willard Parsons, USAF, *Airpower Journal*, Summer 1994.
2. Air Power in Small Wars - The British air control experience af oberstløjtnant David J. Dean, *Air University Review*, July-August 1983.
3. Royal Air Force History: The Inter-War Years (Royal Air Force).
4. Taking up the White Man's Burden - Airpower and the British Empire, 1919-1938 by Robert Craig Johnson. The article was at one time available via Chandelle - A journal of Aviation History.
5. Armoured Cars of the RAF, Part 1-7 af R.J. Peters, *Military Modelling*, February-August 1972.
6. Iraq Levies (Land Forces of Britain, the Empire and Commonwealth).
7. *The Iraq Levies 1915-1932* af Brigadier J. Gilbert Browne, Royal United Services Institution, London 1932. A copy of the book has been seen for sale at Ctesiphon, and some illustrations from it have been used in this paper. The book is available as a reprint from the Naval & Military Press, London. The book's text is also part of Source 8.

8. Assyrian Levies (Gabriel Kiwarkis). Here you will find, among other things, the text of Source 7 - see The Iraq Levies 1915- 1932. The page The Battle for Habbaniya 1941 describes the fighting here, seen from *the Iraq Levies'* side.
9. *Risings and Rebellions 1919-1939: Interwar Colonial Campaigns in Africa, Asia, and the Americas* af Edwin Herbert, Foundry Books Publications, Nottingham 2007, ISBN 1-90154-305-6.
10. *Marine and air force uniforms 1939-45* by Andrew Mollo, Danish Military Publishing House, Hvidovre (no year, but circa 1980), ISBN 87-87794-01-2.
11. The Battle for Habbaniya - The forgotten war (Royal Air Force History).
12. 4 Flying Training School (RAF Valley, Anglesey)
13. *Iraq 1941 - The battles for Basra, Habbaniya, Fallujah and Baghdad* af Robert Lyman, Osprey Campaign No. 165, London 2006, ISBN 1-84176-991-2.

Supplementary material

1. Despatch on Operations in Iraq, East Syria and Iran, from 10th April, 1941 to 12th January, 1942
by General Sir Archibald P. Wavell, Commander-in-Chief, India, London Gazette, 14. august 1946 (Hyper War).
2. Royal Air Force 1939-1945 - Volume 1: The Fight at Odds af Dennis Richards, HMSO, London 1953 (Hyper War). Pages 310-321 describe the combat actions.

Per Finsted

To note:

- 1) From Airfix Magazine, April 1978.
- 2) From Airfix Magazine, January 1979. The armored car is His Majesty's Armored Car (HMAC) Cerebus.
- 3) Hugh Trenchard (1873-1956) (Wikipedia).
- 4) See The Anglo-Somali War 1901-1920 by AB Aller.
- 5) The word *levy* has several meanings, but is probably best translated as *voluntary units*.
- 6) The Assyrians had fled from Turkey to i.a. Mesopotamia after a genocide, analogous to that which befell the Armenian population. Both parts are still heavily debated, see e.g. the debate sections of Assyrian Genocide (Wikipedia) and Armenian Genocide (Wikipedia). Be that as it may, there were large numbers of Assyrians who had fled to Mesopotamia and who formed part of the recruiting base for the volunteer Iraqi units. Similarly, units were recruited from the French side among Armenian refugees in Syria; the units participated i.a. in the fighting in Palestine during the First World War and then in the Franco-Turkish conflict of 1918–19, see Franco-Turkish War (Wikipedia).
- 7) One of these officers was John Frost, who commanded the 2nd Parachute Battalion during the fighting at Arnhem in September 1944. In the memoir *A Drop Too Many*, Sphere Books Limited, London 1980, ISBN 0-7221-3690-0, John describes Frost's experiences from 1938 to 1940 as head of No. 2 Assyrian Company, Iraq Levies. The Assyrian soldiers are referred to as being not unlike Gurkhas, and are described in Source 11 as the only soldiers who could be trusted.
- 8) Habbaniya today (2007) contains the American base *Al Taqqadum*, which is garrisoned by both American units and units of the Iraqi army. See Habbaniya, Iraq (Wikipedia).
- 9) A summary of the political events can be found in Iraq, 1941 (Land Forces of Britain, the Empire and Commonwealth). See also 1941 Iraqi coup d'état (Wikipedia) and Anglo-Iraqi War (Wikipedia).

10) 20th Indian Brigade was the vanguard of 10th Indian Division. John Masters served in the 2nd battalion 4th Prince of Wales's Own Gurkha Rifles (21st Indian Brigade); he has described his experiences from Iraq in the book *The Road past Mandalay*, Corgi Books, London 1973, ISBN 0-552-09291-6.

See also 10th Indian Infantry Division (Wikipedia).

11) However, two 4.5-inch howitzers, veterans of the First World War, which had hitherto graced the space in front of the command post, were provided by an English artilleryman flown in from Basra, together with the necessary ammunition.

12) The figures do not quite agree with the other sources.

13) Fra *Royal Wilts - The History of the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, 1920-1945* at P.W. Pitt, Burrup, Mathieson & Company Ltd., London 1946.

14) For the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Air Force, see Iraq (Armed Forces of World War II (Near East)) and Royal Iraqi Air Force (WW2 Aircraft Profiles). The latter also mentions the German air forces that entered the Iraqi side from 9 May.

15) Card No. 27 of the A Model Army cigarette card series (circa 1935) shows a three-axle Crossley armored car used by the RAF. However, the Iraqi version appears to have had a different type of turret, in the style of British light tanks of the period. See Light Tanks of the UK (Wikipedia).

16) 2006 is listed as the year of publication, but as far as is known, the book did not go on sale until 2007.