

HEADLINE: Invasion, bombs, gas -we've been here before

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BODY:

An attempt by a British force in 1915 to topple the regime in Baghdad ended in utter disaster.

Ben Macintyre hopes there will be no parallels

ARMED with high-tech weapons and even higher expectations, a British Army marches on Baghdad to take control of the oilfields and topple a brutal regime.

Instead, the invaders get bogged down in the foetid marshes and broiling deserts; the enemy refuses to run away; soldiers perish in their thousands and Britain suffers one of its worst military defeats.

Even when regime change is finally brought about, the Iraqi people rise in rebellion and are cowed only by a ferocious aerial bombardment. There is talk of chemical weapons and the occupation drags on, draining blood and treasure, year after year.

This may sound like Tony Blair's nightmare, the worst-case scenario of the looming conflict. In fact, it is the story of Britain's first invasion of Iraq and provides an uncomfortable echo of the events unfolding today.

Then, the soldiers were clad in First World War uniforms; Baghdad was part of the Ottoman Empire and the enemy were Turks. The threat to use poison gas came not from President Saddam Hussein, but from Lawrence of Arabia and Winston Churchill.

The most strident voice urging aerial bombardment to put down Iraqi insurgents was that of Arthur "Bomber" Harris, who would later use those methods to reduce Dresden to rubble.

The Mesopotamia Campaign of 1914-15 was one of the least glorious chapters in British military history, which is why imperial historians made strenuous efforts to forget it. Even Saddam does not celebrate Britain's disaster in his propaganda, for the defenders of Baghdad were not Iraqis but Turkish imperialists. This is one chapter of history that Mr Blair will not be evoking in the coming days; for this, as General George Goringe bitterly recalled afterwards, was "the bastard war", a war nobody much wanted to fight, and few cared to remember, then or now.

British Forces landed at Basra in November 1914 to protect the Persian

oilfields against the Turks and their German allies. "I do not care under what system we keep the oil," Arthur James Balfour, the Foreign Secretary, would declare. "But I am quite clear it is all-important."

At the head of the Army marched Major-General Charles Townshend, amateur violinist, ambitious extrovert and military incompetent. Having secured Basra, the over-confident Townshend pushed north up the Tigris, determined to take Baghdad and restore British prestige in the Middle East in 1915 after the bloody debacle of Gallipoli. As the soldiers trudged through the soggy heat, one Indian trooper was heard to remark: "It passeth my understanding why the British Government should be interested in this Satan-like land."

The gung-ho British press referred to the campaign as the "Mesopotamian picnic", but as the men marched through the flat, fly-blown marshland, a Canadian soldier observed pithily: "This 'ere is the land of sweet F-all with a river up it."

By the time they reached Ctesiphon, 30 miles south of Baghdad, the British were already depleted, dispirited, exhausted and outnumbered. A well-entrenched and reinforced Turkish Army pushed them back, and the dreadful retreat began. By December 1915 the British had regrouped at the village of Kut al-Amara, where they were immediately surrounded and besieged.

The rations ran out after 22 days, but the siege of Kut al-Amara would last for nearly five excruciating months. The men were reduced to eating pack animals, ravaged by heatstroke, cholera, dysentery and scurvy. Every attempt to break out failed. T. E. Lawrence was dispatched to see if he could bribe the Turkish commander into retiring, but without success, and Townshend appears to have suffered a nervous collapse. Finally, in April 1916, he spiked his guns and raised the white flag, but not before the British Army had suffered 23,000 dead and wounded.

Eight thousand survivors were taken prisoner and paraded through the streets of Baghdad and Tikrit, Saddam's home town, where the captives were treated with notable brutality. One soldier recalled the march: "Some were thrashed to death, some robbed of their kit and left to be tortured by the Arabs. Men often fell out from sheer weakness."

Three quarters of them died, but not Townshend, who lived out the war "in comfortable captivity" at the Pasha's palace in Constantinople.

The disaster provoked outrage in Britain, and a new offensive, led by General Sir Stanley Maude. This campaign was as efficient as the other had been inept, and on March 11, 1917, British troops entered Baghdad. Maude did not live long to enjoy his triumph: he died of cholera after drinking a glass of unboiled milk following a performance of Hamlet in Arabic. When the war ended, Townshend,

of all people, emerged from captivity to sign the armistice with the Turks in November 1918.

The Mesopotamia Campaign had shocked even the most ardent imperialists. "We pay for these things too much in honour and in innocent lives," Lawrence wrote. "We cast them by their thousands into the fire to the worst of deaths, not to win the war, but that the corn and rice and oil of Mesopotamia might be ours."

Iraq was invented in the resulting carve-up of the Ottoman Empire, with Britain annexing the provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul. The result was not so much a country as an imperial convenience, artificially shackling together Shias, Sunnis and Kurds, all of whom detested each other. But they loathed the British, and British taxes more, and two years after driving out the Turks, the new imperial rulers of the new-minted Iraq faced a mass rebellion in a country as saturated with guns as it is today.

The British suffered more than 2,000 dead and wounded in the ensuing tribal revolt, and the Iraqis more than four times that number. But in the course of putting down the insurrection, the British hit upon a new tactic of air policing - using bombs. Starting in 1922, RAF biplanes, flying out of Basra and Habbaniya, the airfield north of Baghdad, strafed and shelled the insurgents into submission.

"The attack with bombs and machineguns must be relentless and unremitting and carried on continuously by day and night, on houses, inhabitants, crops and cattle," Wing-Commander J. A. Chamier. wrote The Pentagon's "shock and awe" strategy in Iraq, in which 400 cruise missiles will be rained on Iraq during the first two days of fighting, is the direct descendant of that policy.

"Bomber" Harris, the young commander of the RAF's 45 Squadron, was a particularly enthusiastic advocate. "The Arab and Kurd now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage: they know that within 45 minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured," he bragged. This was imperial law enforcement by high explosive. Drop "one 250lb or 500lb bomb in each village that speaks out of turn", Harris urged.

Others were equally keen. Churchill, then Secretary of State for War and Air, encouraged the use of mustard gas, pointing out that it had already been employed "with excellent morale effect" on the ground. For technical reasons, gas bombs were less effective than delayed detonation explosives, but Lawrence was another enthusiast for chemical weapons. "It is odd that we do not use poison gas on these occasions," he said.

Some, however, doubted the effectiveness, let alone the morality, of bombing Iraq into obedience. "An air bomb in Iraq was equivalent to a police truncheon

at home," wrote Air Commodore Lionel Charlton, who eventually resigned in horror at the "policy of intimidation by bomb". As today, politicians also wondered at the use of air power. Massive civilian casualties "will not be easily explained or defended in Parliament by me", James Thomas, the Colonial Secretary, said.

But bombs were a cheap and effective way of controlling a volatile country with its new puppet King. Chosen by the British in 1921, Faisal I was the third son of the powerful Hashemite clan. He was malleable, cultured and he had joined the revolt against the Turks, which fitted him nicely into the evolving myths of Iraqi nationalism. The only problem with Faisal was that he was virtually unknown to the Iraqis and desperately weak, which was exactly how the British wanted it. Faisal knew just how dependent he was on British goodwill and RAF bombs.

Shortly before he died in 1933, he observed: "There is still no Iraqi people, but unimaginable masses of human beings devoid of any patriotic ideas, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever."

The monarchy would be toppled in 1958, ushering in a decade in which military dictatorships came one after another in bewildering and bloody succession. Saddam Hussein, whose Baath Party seized power in 1968, was the evil spawn of this brutal political world.

The historical parallels stretch only so far. When the British marched towards Baghdad in 1915 they had little idea what they faced; over the past 12 years, Britain and the United States have come to know the Iraqi terrain with grim intimacy. The Iraqi rebels of the 1920s were opposed to colonial rule; today Iraq is oppressed by a home-grown tyrant. The British discussed using chemical weapons, not removing them. Yet the airy confidence of some who predict immediate victory and a pacified Iraq in 2003 is oddly reminiscent of the complacency of British officials in the imperial age.

Gertrude Bell, the government adviser on Iraq in 1920, insisted, as British officials always did before something truly ghastly happens, that the country was utterly tranquil. "The bottom seems to have dropped out of the agitation and most of the leaders are only too anxious to let bygones be bygones," she said. Within months, Britain faced a mass uprising.

In Iraq, 70 years later, the bygones are still anything but bygones. Perhaps the most salutary lesson from Britain's first campaign in Iraq is that war in Mesopotamia is never a picnic.

SADDAM HUSSEIN: An American Obsession, Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn;

Saddam: The Secret Life, Con Coughlin; A History of Iraq, Charles Tripp; A Modern History of the Kurds, David McDowall; The Gulf Conflict, Lawrence Freedman, Efraim Karsh