

Graveyards of Britons killed in another war

Foreign Minister awakes ghosts of former colonisers

At dusk yesterday the ground around the Baghdad North Gate War Cemetery shook with the vibration of the bombs. The oil-grey sky was peppered with anti-aircraft fire. And below the clouds of smoke and the tiny star-like explosion of the shells, Sergeant Frederick William Price of the Royal Garrison Artillery, Corporal A.D. Adsetts of the York and Lancaster Regiment and Aircraftman First Class P. Magee of the Royal Air Force slept on. An eerie place to visit, perhaps, as the first of the night raids closed in on the capital of Iraq.

Not so. For the Iraqi Foreign Minister, Naji Sabri, had spoken earlier of these graves and awoke the ghosts of colonisers past. For No 1401979 Sergeant Price and No 4736364 Corporal Adsetts and No 210493 Aircraftman Magee all died in Britain's first colonial war in Iraq, in 1921. And what was it that Mr Sabri, dressed in his Baath Party uniform said? "British soldiers already have their graveyards in Iraq, from the 1920s and from 1941 ... "Now they will have other graveyards where they will be joined by their friends, the Americans."

It's true that British graves lie across Iraq. Among the saddest is at Kut – bombed by the Americans and British but not yet occupied – where the dead of the great and terrible Ottoman siege of the First World War lie amid the swollen sewers of that scruffy city. There are thousands more at North Gate in Baghdad, on the old road to Mosul.

Private Nicholson of the York and Lancaster Regiment was only 23 when he died on 12 August 1921, Private Clark of the Royal Army Service Corps was 38 when he was killed six days later.

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This first guerrilla war against Iraqi nationalism is now to be refought, according to the Iraqi Baath Party. “We shall turn our desert into a big graveyard for the American and British soldiers,” Mr Sabri said. “The American and British forces who do not surrender will face nothing but death in the desert or else they will have to flee back to their puppet regime of Kuwait.”

As the missiles criss-crossed Baghdad yesterday – one swept over the Tigris at only 200 feet above the ground to explode with a roar and a plume of grey smoke in a presidential compound – the temperature of the language increased proportionately.

The new colonisers, according to the Foreign Minister, were using the old British “golden rule” of “divide and conquer” – we shall forget for a moment that “divide et impera” was originally a Roman rule – and he promised they would never break the unity of the Iraqi people.

From the Information Minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, came claims that the modern-day British Army had just destroyed a water purification plant in Basra, capable of providing water for 1.3 million people, while the same army was busy bringing into Iraq “mineral water from Britain”.

A warehouse had been destroyed in the city, he added, in which 75,000 tons of food supplies were stored. There was no way of checking these statements. Nor, of course, was there any way of confirming his other claims for the past 36 hours: 13 American tanks, eight armoured personnel carriers, six armoured vehicles, four Apache helicopters and a number of pilotless reconnaissance drones destroyed.

It sounded as if Iraq believed it deserved to have destroyed them, as an Egyptian commentator later explained his exaggerations during the 1967 Middle East war. But with Iraqi television showing real video of a burning American Abrams tank and at least two APCs – and with the Anglo-American authorities in Qatar suffering from their usual lockjaw – who can say for sure what casualties either side is taking?

The Americans talk of hundreds of Iraqi dead, the Iraqis claim 43 American and British dead. How much of the rhetoric, anyway, would be abandoned if there was a way out of this war? “Real diplomacy,” Mr Sahaf said, “is to kill them [the Americans and British] on the battlefield so that they feel that their dreams have been foiled. We are not going to allow these dirty lackeys to remain on the land of Iraq.”

Lackeys? Didn't it used to be “lackeys and running dogs” when the Soviet Union existed? Are we really reverting to colonialism? Since the Americans have not reneged on their pledge of occupation and military government, it's hard to avoid the question. Nor is it difficult to imagine what Aircraftman First Class Magee might think as his grave vibrates to the explosion of bombs from the very same Royal Air Force he long ago died for in Iraq. ♦