A ONCE AND PAST LOVE:
PALESTINE 1947, ISRAEL 1948
A MEMOIR

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PREAMBLE

In 1949 Dare Wilson published Cordon and Search (Gale & Polden, Aldershot), a history of the 6th Airborne Division in Palestine from 1945 to 1948, in which he served over those years. The work is as near to an official history as can be, and has a foreword by Major-General Sir Hugh Stockwell, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O. who commanded the division during the period in question. In his preface, Wilson, who was then a Major, wrote:

> *The purpose of this book is to place on record the main tasks and achievements of 6th Airborne Division between September, 1945, and April, 1948, in Palestine, where, in an atmosphere of hatred and violence, the Division was faced with a responsibility in many respects more unpleasant and difficult to carry out than any it had to fulfil in war. It is a story of which those who served with the Division at that time may feel justly proud; not because of any mastery achieved over the civil population, but because of the efficient, humane, and tolerant manner in which a distasteful duty was discharged. Such was the provocation that few forces in the world other than the British Army would have had either the discipline or patience to restrain themselves from counter-violence. The only reward was the satisfaction of a difficult job well done, and yet this in itself inspired the maintenance of an extremely high morale among all ranks of the Division.*

This book has to do with the period in which Britain's mandate in Palestine ended, the state of Israel was born, and the Arab refugee problem originated. Many historians have written on these matters, and many more will do so. I arrived in Haifa, Palestine, on 23 December 1947, and left Haifa, Israel, on 30 June 1948. A Once and Past Love records my recollections of those tumultuous months. The genre is obviously that of memoir, but to this observation I add a caveat. A number of matters arise in the pages below that are germane to the conflicting interpretations that characterize the historiography of the period. In this respect A Once and Past Love may be read as a source book and one perhaps of particular interest to adherents of that approach so indelicately referred to as "history from the bottom up." My credentials in this respect were impeccable: I had served King and Country in Palestine in the lowly role of subaltern!

The Army and I parted ways in late 1948. In time I became an historian, and count myself among those who see their job as finding out what (really) happened in the past and explaining why things happened as they did and not otherwise. In putting together A Once and Past Love I have been acutely aware of the dangers of hindsight. Such success as I have had has been due primarily to a diary that survived the years. I have quoted extensively from it in order to convey something of the singularity of a document for the most part penned late at night by candlelight in a small tent pitched in the sorry remnants of what had once been a flourishing olive grove on the lower slope of Mount Carmel. For reasons that will become clear later, I had to be circumspect about what I wrote. The diary is, however, supplemented with various other items that have escaped destruction, most usefully family letters, official reports, newspaper clippings, and photographs. Such are the primary sources for this memoir, and I have sought to present events as I perceived and recorded them at the time. I have, however, taken one liberty. Many of the conversations I reported were culled from diary entries, but others tapped memories that had remained uncannily clear over the years even to the matter of individual quirks of speech.

The diary and the supplementary materials lay unattended until 1969 when a good friend and colleague at Northwestern University, Ibrahim Abu Lughod, persuaded me to search out the diary for him to see. He was first to suggest that it should be published. I had a number of commitments that took priority at the time, but I did produce an expurgated typescript of the diary by excising sections that were personal and of no relevance to the turbulent political

situation in Palestine. The shorter version of the diary was made available to several American scholars who wished to use it in courses on the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was not until 1988 that I finally acted on Abu-Lughod's suggestion.

In a series of conversations between 6 April and 10 June an experienced interviewer, Nancy Lawler, patiently led me through the diary entry by entry, activating memories (and in some cases false memories) of the months I spent in Palestine. The next year, 1989, she and I were married, and she accompanied me to Israel where I revisited familiar places and renewed old acquaintanceships. Our visit was greatly facilitated by two friends of long standing, the Israeli scholars Nehemia and Tirtza Levtzion. They were the most generous of hosts, and were able to arrange meetings with many of their compatriots, some of them I had known in 1948 and some I had never met but their ways and mine had nevertheless crossed. The Levtzions enthusiastically projected a Hebrew translation of A Once and Past Love, but with their sad deaths this has faltered.

The return to Israel made me aware that what has been forgotten may be as significant as what has been remembered, and that false memories as well as veridical ones may throw light on the past. The reader interested in such matters may find his or her attention engaged by an instance of false memory that is unraveled in the course of this memoir. Its theme was explored in an adaptation of the memoir by Richard Segall, whose one-man show, Unholy Months in a Holy Land, was performed with great flair at Northwestern University on 4 and 5 June 1993.

The Israel I loved and left in mid-1948 is scarcely recognizable in the Israel of today. The triumph of the Palestinian Jew became the tragedy of the Palestinian Arab. But there still are, as there were then, those of both nationalities who continue to work for a future in which a just peace will be established. This is their book.

CHAPTER ONE
DECEMBER 1947

Arriving in Palestine

On 29 November 1947 the General Assembly of the United Nations approved a proposal to partition Palestine between Arabs and Jews. Thirty-three of its members voted for the measure, thirteen against, ten abstained, and there was one absentee. I doubt whether I took much notice of that portentous vote. I was then a 2nd Lieutenant in the British Army, assigned to Middle East Land Forces and awaiting embarkation at a camp near Thetford, in Norfolk. Trained first as an infantryman with the Queen's Royal Regiment, and then as a specialist in amphibious operations with the Royal Army Service Corps, I was expecting to be posted to 101 General Transport Company (Amphibian). This was in the Canal Zone of Egypt, where several waterborne units, badly mauled in the Italian campaigns of 1944, had found a resting place on the Great Bitter Lake. I was only in my twentieth year, but desperately anxious to look older. Every morning I inspected what seemed to hold promise of one day becoming a respectable moustache!

On 4 December I boarded the Empress of Australia in Liverpool. My last impression of England was of a medley of sounds rather than sights, a cacophony of hooting from ships that I could not see through the thick fog that enshrouded Merseyside. Late in the evening the beam of the Holyhead lighthouse was visible as we rounded the coast of north Wales. The Irish Sea was rough. The Bay of Biscay was wracked by storms, and all personnel were confined below deck for two days. Then Gibraltar loomed through the mists and we entered a Mediterranean that was calm and sunny. The island of Pantelleria in the Sicilian Channel had an intangibly dreamlike character as it slid by to starboard. Malta provided a few welcome hours in port. I relaxed on the boat deck and wrote an extraordinarily bad poem that I had the good sense to lose. Two or three days later we docked in Port Said. It was early morning but already very hot. The smell of oil from the refineries remains an indelible impression. I saw nothing of Port Said, having been instructed to proceed immediately by train to Suez.

I shared a compartment with a young Egyptian. He spoke English and took it upon himself to provide a useful commentary on the journey. Well versed in the logistics of travel, he procured bread and dried fish at El-Qantara and generously shared both with me. It was my first meal ashore. We reached Suez late in the afternoon. "We shall meet again, God willing," said my companion. We never did, of course, but as he vanished into the milling crowd a corporal appeared to escort me to a waiting vehicle. Within a short time I was the occupant of Tent 4, Base Transit Depot. It was 16 December. There I awaited further orders. In the meantime I was free to wander round Suez. Unable to resist the lure of parts of the town posted, "Internationally Out of Bounds," I was duly spat on by those living in squalor of a kind quite unknown to me. I also visited the residential suburb of Port Tewfiq, and saw the sumptuous houses and clubs of the Egyptian haute bourgeoisie. Then, on 21 December, I was summoned to the Transit Camp office. There I learned that I was not to remain in the Canal Zone. I had been reassigned to British Troops in Palestine and placed on the strength of 376 Petrol Platoon near Haifa.

Much astonished, I assumed that someone somewhere in the bureaucratic depths of Headquarters, Middle East Land Forces, had decided that, my military training notwithstanding, a Higher School Certificate in scientific subjects better qualified me to serve as a technical officer. I was informed that I should report to the vehicle pool at 0700 the next day, when a car would be leaving for Jerusalem. I was more than a little intimidated to find that I was traveling in the company of a colonel whose conspicuous red tabs showed him to be an officer of the General Staff. He was both pompous and patronizing.

"Just arrived here have you, my boy?"
"Yes Sir."
"Royal Army Service Corps, what?"

"Yes Sir."

"Good outfit that. Used to be the Royal Waggoners in the old days, do you know."

"Yes Sir."

I did not know, of course, but how else was a junior subaltern to respond?

Between Suez and Isma'iliya, as we drove beside the Suez Canal and the Great Bitter Lake, the colonel talked about the misdeeds of Britain's Labour Government.

"Disgrace to the country, my boy. "They'll ruin us all."

"Yes Sir."

"That man Bevin, he ought to be shot."

"Yes Sir."

Since I regarded Cabinet Minister Ernest Bevin as having betrayed the cause of the Labour Party I felt able, for the first time, to make an honest albeit modest contribution to the conversation. "A disastrous Foreign Secretary," I said. "Quite right, my boy," the colonel replied, "you've got a good head on your shoulders." I was thankful to find that, having decided that we were of the same mind, the colonel regarded the matter as closed.

From Isma'iliya we struck eastwards into the wastes of Sinai. The desolation of the landscape seemed to inspire the colonel. He became almost loquacious. "A very old road, this," he said; "it's the way Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt, you know." I expressed my genuine interest with exclamations of "good gracious" and "my word" and the like. The colonel was, I came to learn, a liaison-officer who shuttled back and forth between General Headquarters, Middle East Land Forces, in the Canal Zone, and Headquarters, British Troops in Palestine, in Jerusalem. The situation in Palestine was an absolute shambles, he told me. The Army could obtain no clear directives from the politicians in London. The Mandate would end, he said, but that was about all we could be sure of. There was that fellow Creech-Jones at the Colonial Office who was pro-Jewish ("should be Screech-Jones, what?"). Then there was that disaster ("good expression, my boy") Bevin at the Foreign Office, who was pro-Arab. And what about Attlee? He answered his own question: "Attlee sits on the fence. Major Attlee sits on the fence." I chuckled, to show that I realized that the Prime Minister had never attained the exalted military rank of my traveling companion.

The road ran between ranges of rugged hills to north and south, and then entered dune country. "A hundred thousand soldiers in Palestine," mused the colonel. "Where are we going to put them all?" On my own way to swell the number, I assumed that I was not expected to offer a solution. "And half a million tons of moveable equipment, what about that?" he added; "the Egyptians don't want it all in their country, you know." I was sure he was right about that. "Kenya, my boy, that's the place, but how are we going to get stuff there?" Gaining confidence, I remarked that Kenya was a long way from Palestine. My intervention was well received. "Good thinking, my boy. You'll go a long way in the army." I felt flattered, and contemplated the day when I, too, might be a colonel, generously putting some young subaltern at ease.

We crossed the great Wadi El Arish at the oasis of Abu Aweigila, and some 20 miles beyond entered Palestine at Hafir El 'Auja (known today as Nizzana). We had traveled about 200 miles from Suez. It was early afternoon and oppressively hot. The driver pulled into the large police post, where the colonel was obviously very well known. We were instantly seated in a shady corner of the yard, and beer was produced. "You must be very tired, my boy," the colonel said. I was not, having made so few contributions to the conversation, but he was quite exhausted and soon dozed off.

I strolled across the yard and was joined by a Palestine Police officer. "Must be hell working for that bugger," he remarked. I explained that the colonel was a transitory figure in my life, and I in his. "Thank God for that, mate," he said. He was an Australian. He insisted on taking me to see something of "old" El 'Auja, as he put it. My heart sank as I looked at the steep slopes of the huge tel that dominated the town, but fortunately this was not the objective he had in mind. He showed me some stretches of very rusted narrow gauge railway line, and a stone house that had once been El 'Auja Station. The Turks were building the railway in 1916, he said, to bring up troops and supplies in readiness for an assault on the Suez Canal. And so my first ancient monument in Palestine, unless the colonel could be

regarded as such, was a Great War one. The Australian took me to a small Arab bar where we drank rather a lot of arak in a rather short space of time. It was only then that he told me that his father had died at Gallipoli in 1915, fighting the Turks. I remember the occasion as a very touching one.

It was late afternoon when the colonel decided to resume the journey to Jerusalem. We had now left the Egyptian Sinai for the Palestinian Negev, but there was little change in the landscape. It was almost dark as we passed Bir 'Asluj, and quite dark when we reached Beersheba. My impressions of the long climb to Hebron, high in the Judean Mountains, are auditory rather than visual. The snoring of the colonel vied with the straining of the engine until, at Bethlehem, the colonel woke up. "Soon be Christmas, what?" With that I agreed. His next comment, however, took me by surprise. "Ever heard of Dov Gruner, my boy?" As a matter of fact I had. Talks on current affairs were among the indignities to which officer cadets were regularly subjected, and I remembered an appalling man from the Army Education Corps assuring us that hanging was the only effective way of dealing with such terrorists as Gruner. I had no need to reply, however, for by now the colonel was once again in full spate. Something about being in Bethlehem a few days before Christmas had, it seemed, triggered off a stream of thoughts.

"The Jews, they had a bad time in Europe, my boy," he said. "Gas chambers and all that sort of thing. Bad show. Shouldn't treat even Jews that way, what? But can't have them turning against us, can we? No gas chambers in England, were there? A misguided fellow, that Dov Gruner. Attacked a police post, you know. Can't have that sort of thing going on. A brave chap, though. Too proud to ask for clemency. All mixed up in his mind, but you have to admire him, what? Shouldn't have hanged him. That's my opinion. What do you think, my boy?"

Emboldened by what I mistook to be the colonel's liberal sentiments, I expressed my agreement. Dov Gruner, I remarked, should have been treated as a prisoner of war. "Good God," said the colonel, quite aghast, "Nonsense, utter nonsense. We should have given him hard labour for life. Time for him to see the error of his ways." He paused. I knew what was coming. "Hanging," he said, "was too good for him." We sat in silence for the remaining few miles to Jerusalem. The car drew up at the King David Hotel. "Good night, sir," I said. "Prisoner of war indeed!" he replied. I never saw him again.

It was long past midnight and for me, unlike the colonel, there was no room at the inn that then housed the Secretariat of the Government of Palestine and the Headquarters of British Troops in Palestine. A sergeant was on duty at what had once been the reception desk. A telephone call sufficed. An elderly Arab was summoned to help me with my luggage, and I spent my first night in Palestine – or morning, to be accurate – at the Jerusalem YMCA. I slept fitfully for two or three hours before being awakened by the Muslim faithful being called to the first prayer of the day. I looked out of my window and saw the King David framed against a sun rising over the hills of Transjordan. I can recollect, vividly, the sense of excitement I felt, that beautiful dawn just two days before Christmas.

The Army was efficient. In the early hours of the morning some clerk in some busy little office had ascertained my location and prepared a movement order that was delivered into my hands as I had breakfast. Transport to Haifa had been arranged for 1500 hours. I spent the morning doing what every visitor to Jerusalem does. I retain in memory no more than a kaleidoscopic image of churches, mosques, shops, and narrow alleys leading from quarter to quarter – Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Armenian, and so forth. In the afternoon I was told that I was again to travel by car. This time I had no companion other than the driver, a truculent individual who quickly informed me that he was "bloody well browned off." He had left Haifa that morning to bring some "bigwigs" to Jerusalem, and obviously did not relish having to take a junior officer back on the same day. He wished, he said, that he was still driving a taxi in London. He had obviously belonged to that brand of cabby who believed that passengers were to be moved from place to place but not talked to, for thereafter he was silent. Short on sleep, I dozed off. I confess, with a sense of opportunity missed, that I remember virtually nothing of our progress through the Arab towns of Ramallah, Nablus and Jenin.

"You all right, sir?" asked the driver; "we're nearly there." It was dusk. The hills of the Carmel range rose to our left, the valley of Jezreel stretched away to the right. It seemed a world apart from the deserts of the Negev and the mountains of Judea. Within less than half an hour I was delivered – the term seems appropriate – to 376 Petrol Platoon, Nesher Camp, and was rapidly established in the tent that was to become my home for the next six months. Three subalterns came to welcome me, and I joined them for dinner. It was a very quiet if not totally abstemious occasion that they used for sizing up the newcomer.

376 Petrol Platoon

My first day on duty was Christmas Eve. It turned out to be one of which I had, for reasons that will be quite apparent, only the vaguest of memories. I was invited to spend the evening at the mess of the NCOs, the Non-Commissioned Officers. "Just for a drink and a chat, sir," said the sergeant who brought the invitation. From one of my newly acquired fellow officers I gathered that the "drink and chat" was of the nature of a trial by ordeal. Pass it, he said, and the sergeants and corporals and lance corporals will be ready to die for you. But fail it, and you will have lost their respect and should never again presume to rely on them. I took all of this, of course, with a grain of salt, feeling sure that I could hold my own in any drinking session. And so I went to their mess like a lamb to the slaughter. A chorus of "good evening, sir" came from the dozen or so NCOs assembled at the bar. "Have an atomic cocktail," said the barman; "it's our specialty." A large glass was filled to the brim with measures of whisky, gin, rum, vodka, sherry and whatever happened to be on the shelves. I have no recollection of how many of those concoctions I drank. I vaguely remember thanking my hosts for their generosity, bidding them a good night, and walking – yes, actually walking – out of the mess. I was sure that I had survived the ordeal. I was quite unsure, however, of the way to my tent, for I had not been in Nesher Camp long enough to have any idea of its layout. Indeed, the only good reason for thinking that I did find my tent that night was that I woke up in it the next morning. But the NCOs, I learned later, were deeply impressed.

On Christmas morning I wandered rather disconsolately around the camp not at all sure what I was expected to do, but mid-afternoon saw the launching of a small party in the Officers' Mess. None of us had any idea whatsoever how, by early evening, two young women had joined us. No one present had invited them. We should, I suppose, have been suspicious. British soldiers were being sniped at daily on the streets of Haifa, and sometimes killed. Neither of the women, however, conformed to any image we had of a terrorist and it was for us, after all, the Season of Goodwill. The two were obviously close friends. They sat together in a corner, talking vivaciously and giggling much. As they cast their glances round the room, not one of us doubted that they were giggling about him.

The mess was a small one. Only five officers belonged to it, and the platoon was seldom at full strength. Modest gestures had been made to the season. The top of an evergreen of doubtful origins stood in a pot. It was rather pathetically bedecked with a few incandescent balls of the sort costing a penny or two so in any branch of Woolworth's. Some red and blue paper streamers had been strung between the bar counter and the ceiling. The whole effect was decidedly seedy. The saving grace was the elderly and portly Egyptian, Jad Mohammed Ahmed, who had come from Luxor to Haifa in search of employment. He was our cook, but he also doubled as head barman to which office he brought immense dignity. He never allowed our glasses to remain empty, and never failed to have us sign for each and every drink we called for. As the alcohol slowly took effect Jad Mohammed was known sometimes to have us sign for the same drink twice, but we did not mind. We were very fond of him and he, we felt, of us. He tolerated and even spoiled us, "his officers."

The platoon's commanding officer, Captain Hyden, was not present at the party. He had been posted elsewhere with effect from 30 December, and was on local leave. A Lt. Kenyon was the senior officer present. Second-in-command of 376 Petrol Platoon, he was also in charge of security for the whole of Nesher Camp, and we saw relatively little of him. 2nd/Lt. T. J. F. McClenahan had been posted to the platoon some weeks before me. I knew him simply as Paddy and we were to become the best of friends. 2nd/Lt. Wallace I do not

remember at all well, and I think that he must have been moved elsewhere soon after my arrival. And so there were the four of us at the party. We had all attended exclusively male schools, which was quite usual in those far-off times. Our combined knowledge of the opposite sex, other than of mothers or sisters, was miserably inadequate. If we looked back on any sexual encounters, it was most likely with mortification resulting from failed experiments if not outright disasters. Our successes had been on the rugger field or cricket pitch, and it was of such things that we talked together and modestly boasted of our prowess. But we had been taught to think of ourselves as gentlemen as well as officers, and we had the decency to feel ashamed at our awkwardness when these two women appeared in our male preserve.

Having joined the platoon only two days before, such was the pecking order that it was decided that I should approach the strangers in our midst. My ordeal of the night before, my first and I hoped last encounter with atomic cocktails, was rejected as an excuse. It was, then, not out of forwardness on my part but rather as an inescapable duty, that I approached the two and asked if I might get them drinks. The one, Leila, was Arab. I never did meet her again. The other, taller and with somewhat lighter hair, was Jewish. She said her name was Valentina, and that is how I came to know her. She is to play an important part in this memoir.

I spent the rest of the evening talking to Valentina. She was a talented conversationalist. Her English, a sixth language after Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Arabic and Farsi, was racy. I learned that her father, accused of bourgeois deviation, had fled Soviet Russia in the early 1920s. He settled in Iran, where he married. Valentina was born there. She was still a child when her parents moved to Palestine. She went to school in Haifa. This much she told me, but no more. Instead, she plied me with questions. I was flattered by her interest. I doubt whether I had ever talked as much about myself as I did that Christmas, at Valentina's prompting.

Valentina found out that my politics were leftwing but that I was also active in the Welsh nationalist cause. She learned that I had been in Coventry during the massive air raid of 14 November 1940, when my father had been grievously injured by blast. I told her that I had volunteered for the Indian Army in late 1945, and she queried my motives. Was that not a betrayal of my principles? I pointed out that a Labour government was already in office in Britain and was committed to Indian independence. "How then have you come to be in Palestine?" Valentina asked. I explained at some length and remember being astonished that she showed no signs of boredom. All these things and more we talked about on that Christmas Day of so long ago. The party ended in the early hours of the morning. Valentina made a telephone call, and a taxi arrived from Nesher to take her and Leila to Haifa.

Nesher? I shall have many occasions to refer to the Jewish village on the northern side of which our camp lay. Late as it was when our visitors left, I had duties to attend to. One of the responsibilities assigned to me on arrival at 376 Petrol Platoon was a nighttime one. Balad esh-Sheikh was a small Arab town that adjoined the camp to the north. The platoon had four petrol storage tanks above the Wadi el-Tabel, a dried-up valley that lay between Nesher and Balad esh-Sheikh. One of these, Tank B, was non-operational at the time, but the other three, A, C and D, had to be dipped daily to record the amount of petrol each contained. It was, unfortunately, a figure that could only be obtained accurately when the heat of the day had given way to the cool of the night. This was my first encounter with the tanks.

My driver skilfully negotiated a road that wound backwards and forwards through Balad esh-Sheikh, slowly ascending the lower slopes of Mount Carmel. Arriving at the first tank, I remember getting out of the Jeep, returning the salutes of the Arab Legion guards, and dipping it. It was a procedure that I did not yet perform very expertly, and I took a long time obtaining the readings. It was a clear, starry night, and I found myself wondering if I could have fallen in love with a woman I had met only a few hours before, in an insalubrious building that served as Officers' Mess for 376 Petrol Platoon? I made sure that the telephone number that Valentina had given me was safe in my shirt pocket.

Petrol, Imperial Policy, and Palestine

Only a few hours elapsed between dipping the tanks in Wadi el-Tabel and rising, most reluctantly, to start work again. It was my third day in Nesher Camp, and I was beginning to see how 376 Petrol Platoon fitted within that complex military structure known as "British Troops in Palestine." I began to pull together whatever data I could find on the oil industry in Middle East. I had, after all, become a minute – exceedingly minute – part of it!

At the end of World War II the British cabinet had given high priority to making supplies of oil from Middle East secure, and thereby containing Soviet expansion in that direction. Discussions with strategists convinced Foreign Secretary Bevin that the military bases in Egypt were not well located for these purposes, and decided that British interests would best be served by building up military resources in Palestine. To this development Haifa was of key importance. The Kirkuk oil field in northern Iraq had the world's largest known reserve. From it the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) pumped about 2 million tons of crude oil annually into its storage tanks at Haifa, over 600 miles away, by a pipeline that traversed Transjordan. The ownership of the Company was approximately half British, a quarter American, and a quarter French, but some 5% belonged to a private financier. Another 2 million tons of crude oil reached Haifa through British companies in Tripoli, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf. Much of the oil was refined at the British-owned Consolidated Refineries Ltd. (CRL), virtually a subsidiary of IPC. There were plans, moreover, to treble the supply of oil to Haifa by the construction of a second and larger line from Kirkuk, and additionally to procure consignments from the distant fields in Kuwait. It was hoped to increase the output of the Haifa refinery to between 7 and 9 million tons a year by 1951. All such plans had to be abandoned when the events with which this memoir is concerned so abruptly transformed the political landscape of Middle East.

At the end of the European war the 6th Airborne Division, then in Germany, was repatriated and retrained for service in south-east Asia. The Japanese surrender obliged a change of plan. The buildup of troops in Palestine began with the arrival there, as part of the Imperial Strategic Reserve, of the 6th Airborne Division. This was in September 1945. There were several airfields in southern Palestine that had the capability for training troops for airborne operations, and it was not foreseen that the Division would become involved in matters of internal security. Reality turned out otherwise. The newly arrived troops were rapidly drawn into what were euphemistically styled, "peace-keeping duties", in effect, the maintenance of civil order within the Palestine Mandate.

The 6th Airborne Division established its headquarters in the Carmelite Monastery on Mount Carmel, overlooking Haifa Bay. There was some wrangling about whether formations that had been in existence before the Division's arrival, that is, North Palestine District and Haifa Base, should be added to its battle order. In early 1947 the General Officer commanding the Division arranged for the amalgamation of the two older groups that then came in some sense under his command. At 376 Petrol Platoon even a year later we were unsure of our exact position in the grand structure of British Troops in Palestine, but our orders came from Haifa through C.RASC, that is, Commander of the Royal Army Service Corps in Palestine.

Camp 149 covered a large expanse of wasteland at the foot of Mount Carmel adjoining Jewish Nesher and Arab Balad esh-Sheikh some 4 miles from Haifa on the Jenin road. It became known as Nesher Camp but might just as well have been given the Arabic name. There were three static units within its perimeter, one being our Platoon. The second consisted of the headquarters and technical workshops of 4 Petrol Station Company, which managed actual vehicle filling stations in Haifa itself, Jerusalem, Sarafand, and Asluj. Its commanding officer was a major who, as senior officer in Nesher Camp, also served as its commander. 376 Petrol Platoon was not under his orders other than in such maters as camp security. The third static unit was a formidable looking building that lay far from either of the petrol units, and was in fact a massive refrigeration plant known as Nesher Cold Storage Depot. Much of the food consumed by British Troops in Palestine passed in and out of its portals. I never had reason to visit the site.