

## CHAPTER 1

# Prologue: Palestine, 1942–1944

I understand that it is now a suburb of Tel Aviv, but when I first went to Lydda it was out in the country where we built the first air base in Palestine, now called Israel.

Maj. Gen. Alden K. Sibley<sup>1</sup>

During the early days of World War II, Palestine was a backwater. Worldwide headlines came later, in the wake of Israel's independence, the tank battles and aerial shootouts of the Arab-Israeli wars, and the oil embargo that caused long lines at American service stations. Still, the lack of publicity did not alter the fact that the region was important to the United States and its Allies. The fighting in nearby North Africa led to establishment of a network of Allied logistical facilities throughout the Middle East. Midway through 1941, the influx of airplanes and supplies overburdened Great Britain's bases in Egypt, the Sudan, and Palestine. Britain and the United States, which had not yet entered the war but which had provided material aid against the Axis powers, decided to expand the regional transportation system and build new depots for storage and repair.<sup>2</sup>

Expansion of the logistical base at the far eastern end of the Mediterranean called for rapid construction and brought the Corps of Engineers to the region. The North Atlantic Division of the Corps, with its headquarters in New York City, established the North African District to manage the program. Because of the urgent construction needs, the district negotiated a cost-plus-fixed-fee contract with the Minneapolis firm of Johnson, Drake & Piper, Inc.<sup>3</sup> Such a contract differed from the normal one in which the cost of a project was settled in advance. Cost-plus arrangements assured the contractor reimbursement for legitimate expenses incurred during construction, guaranteed a fee above those costs, and allowed the work to start without time-consuming and complex negotiations.

Early in 1942 management of the program moved to Middle East District's headquarters in Asmara, Eritrea. In February Maj. Louis Claterbos, the district engineer, set up three subordinate of-

fices. With the permission of the British government in Jerusalem, which governed Palestine under a mandate from the League of Nations, the three included the Palestine Area Office in Tel Aviv. Lt. Frank A. Ferguson, the area engineer, had his office in the Barclay's Bank Building on Rothschild Boulevard, located in the old commercial center in the southern part of the city.<sup>4</sup>

The Tel Aviv office did a modest amount of work in the city and nearby. Those who worked there saw their operation, renamed the Levant Area Office in a summer 1942 reorganization that moved the district office to Cairo, as isolated and neglected. "There is a general disgust," a lieutenant observed, "among . . . personnel in the Levant concerning what they report as lack of attention by headquarters personnel in Cairo to their needs. Several expressed the opinion that Cairo seemed to forget all about them except when missions were desired to be carried out."<sup>5</sup>

The Levant office's most significant project was construction of a depot at Tel Litvinsky, a few miles east of Jaffa and just south of Ramat Gan. Initial plans envisioned a major repair base for equipment that had been manufactured in the United States for the British Army. It would resemble the larger one at Heliopolis outside of Cairo except that it would lack a diesel locomotive maintenance shop. As the battle lines in North Africa receded westward, plans for Tel Litvinsky were scaled down. In February 1943 it became a rest camp and jerrican plant. Then, later in the spring, the Army canceled plans for the manufacture of the fuel containers. The most consequential entries in the headquarters journal announced the arrival of Coca-Cola syrup for the bottling plant in Haifa and the visit of comedian Jack Benny.<sup>6</sup>

The office had two other small projects. In Tel Aviv, at the intersection of Dizengoff and Arlosoroff streets in the northern and more modern part of the city, the Corps built an optical repair shop and laboratory. The shop repaired lenses for the British Army in North Africa. The third project, also small, involved improving an airstrip near Lydda. A few miles southeast of Tel Litvinsky, the strip consisted of only one little-used runway amid the orange groves. The Levant office restored the runway and constructed a building for pilots and repair crews. Small liaison planes used the field, but it could handle larger DC-3s as well.<sup>7</sup>

With only these three projects, the Tel Aviv office represented little more than a footnote to operations in the Middle East and North Africa. The depot at Tel Litvinsky faded into near oblivion before closing in November 1943, and the airstrip never grew beyond its one runway. The office itself went through a number of name changes worthy of a much larger organization, from Pales-

tine Area Office to Levant Service Command to Levant Area Office. The Army terminated the contract of Johnson, Drake & Piper on 31 March 1943. Later in the year North Atlantic Division was removed from the chain of command. The Tel Aviv office finally closed in January 1944.<sup>8</sup>

Thirty-five years later the Corps of Engineers returned to Tel Aviv. The new office also reported to North Atlantic Division in New York. Once again the work involved managing cost-plus airfield construction, albeit on a vastly larger scale. The mission required rapid completion of two desert air bases for the State of Israel. Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai peninsula, as promised in the historic 1979 peace treaty with Egypt, depended on timely and skillful execution of the job. This is the story of that important mission.

## Notes

1. Interv, Paul K. Walker with Alden K. Sibley, Jul 82, Brownfield, Me., copy in Office of History, HQ USACE.

2. Edith C. Rogers, *The Army Air Force in the Middle East: A Study of the Origins of the Ninth Air Force*, AAF Reference History 8, Manuscript 101–108 [Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, n.d.], p. 20.

3. Historical Section, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff G–2, HQ, AMET, *History of Africa–Middle East Theater*, sec. II, Principal Special Staff Reports, vol. 3, n.d., p. 2, copy in Historical Records Branch, CMH, Washington, D.C.; *Middle East War Projects of Johnson, Drake & Piper, Inc., for the Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army 1942–1943* (New York: William E. Rudge's Sons, 1943), p. 13.

4. *History of Africa–Middle East Theater*, sec. II, vol. 3, p. 3; Ltr, Lt Col Alden K. Sibley, Operations Planning Section, through CG, SOS, USAFIME, to CG, USAFIME, 18 Aug 43, Alden K. Sibley Papers, Office of History, HQ USACE.

5. Ltr, Lt Hal F. Winter to CG, USAFIME, 7 Sep 42, AMET G–2 files, Box 724, AMET Records, Record Group (RG) 332, National Archives (NA), Suitland, Md.

6. Ltr, Sibley to CG, USAFIME, 18 Aug 43, Sibley Papers; *History of Africa–Middle East Theater*, sec. II, vol. 3, p. 52; HQ, Levant Service Command, Headquarters Journal, entries for 19 Aug and 4 Sep 43, Records of Levant Service Command, Box 566916, RG 338, NA; Interv (telephone), author with Sibley, Mar 83. For the location of Tel Litvinsky on a map, see Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 37.

7. Ltr, Frank A. Ferguson to Economics Division, USAFIME, 12 Feb 44, Records of the Engineer Officer, AMET, File 322, Box 746, RG 332, NA; USAFIME, Agenda for Fourth Meeting, Middle East Council, American Aid Subcommittee, 3 Nov 42, Sibley Papers; Interv, Walker with Sibley, Jul 82. The building at 200 Dizengoff Street later became known as Engineers House and served as the headquarters for a national engineering association.

8. GO 7, HQ, USAFIME, Cairo, 16 Jan 44, Records of the Engineer Officer, AMET, File 322, Box 746, RG 332, NA; Ltr, Lt Col N. H. Wild to Commanders, Eritrea, Delta, Levant, and Libyan Service Commands, 14 Mar 43, Records of the Engineer Officer, AMET, File 321.7, Box 745, RG 332, NA; Work Order 65, Operations Section, Construction Division, USAFIME, 12 Nov 43, Records of the Engineer Officer, AMET, File 322, Box 746, RG 332, NA; *History of Africa–Middle East Theater*, sec. II, vol. 3, p. 11.