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XXVII. Italian Air Attack on American Missionaries in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan

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On August 30, 1940, the American Legation at Cairo reported the receipt of information from the Sudan government authorities concerning an attack from the air upon a station of the Sudan Interior Mission at Doro, Upper Nile Province, which took place on August 23, as a result of which Dr. and Mrs. Robert Grieve were killed and Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Oglesby were wounded. All of the victims were citizens of the United States.

As a consequence of the occurrence, the American Chargé d'Affaires ad interim at Rome, acting under instructions from the Department, delivered the following communication to the Italian Government on November 1, 1940:

"On August 23, 1940, shortly after nine o'clock in the morning, two Italian aircraft attacked the compound of the Sudan Interior Mission at Doro in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, resulting in the killing of Dr. and Mrs. Robert C. Grieve and the wounding of the Reverend and Mrs. C. K. Oglesby, all American citizens.

"As soon as my Government learned of the occurrence, the American Legation at Cairo was instructed to make a most thorough investigation of all the facts and circumstances concerning the incident so far as might be possible, based in particular on eye-witness sources. That investigation has now been completed and, under instructions of my Government, I have been directed to acquaint the Royal Italian Government with what follows.

"An American branch of the Sudan Interior Mission, an international missionary organization with American, Brit-

ish and Canadian branches, has been established for some time at Doro, with a mission station also at Chali. For some six months prior to August 23, 1940, the mission at Doro consisted of the Reverend and Mrs. C. K. Oglesby, Dr. and Mrs. R. C. Grieve, all American citizens, and Miss Zullah Walsh, a British subject, ordinarily resident of Australia.

"Doro, like Chali, is a small open undefended village and, apart from the mission compound, is exclusively native. There are no military or police posts at Doro mission station or in the village of Doro or any military works of any character. The village itself consists of some 15 native tukls.

"Mr. Malcolm I. Forsberg, an American citizen, of the Sudan Interior Mission at Chali has declared in a sworn affidavit that 'having learned from three Greek traders from Kurmuk passing through Chali on their way to Melut of disorders in the Kurmuk area and bearing in mind the nearness of Chali and Doro to Kurmuk', he addressed on July 27, 1940, a letter to the Commander, Italian Army at Dul, Ethiopia, reading as follows:

"SIR:

"This is to inform you that there are two men one woman and a child at Chali all of whom are Americans. There are two men and three women at Doro one young lady of whom is Australian. The rest are Americans. We are engaged solely in missionary work among the Uduk and Maban tribes. We have placed an American flag on one of the houses at Chali.

"Sincerely yours,

"M. I. FORSBERG,
"Sudan Interior Mission.'

"According to Mr. Forsberg's affidavit, he received on August 5, 1940 the following communication dated August 2, 1940 from the Commander Italian Army, Kurmuk (signature illegible):

"Mr. M. I. FORSBERG,
"Sudan Interior Mission,
"Chali.

"I have received your letter of which I understand the presence of your mission in my territory. I shall be glad

to see you all, men and women, here at Kurmuk every one with his own passport. I hope that the travel by Chali and Doro to Kurmuk may afford like to you. Please accept my best wishes to ladies and my salutations to gentlemen.

“ ‘Commander Italian army Kurmuk.’

“On August 5, date of receipt of the foregoing, Mr. Forsberg, according to his sworn statement, sent the following reply to the Italian Commander at Kurmuk:

“ ‘The COMMANDER

“ ‘Italian Army at Kurmuk.

“ ‘DEAR SIR:

“ ‘I received your letter of August 2, 1940, today. I will send word concerning your wishes to our missionaries in Doro. It will be a number of days before we can get an answer from them. We have no means to take us to Kurmuk. It would be dangerous for the child and for the ladies to travel in the wet now when there is malaria. One of the ladies at Doro (near Boin) is going to have a baby and is very ill from that. She also is just recovering from Malaria. It would be very hard for her to travel now. We will appreciate it if you will let us stay in our houses at Chali and Doro until you occupy this territory.

“ ‘Sincerely yours,

“ ‘M. I. FORSBERG,
“ ‘*Sudan Interior Mission.*’

“Mr. Forsberg further avers that following the despatch of the letter quoted above ‘he received no communication from the Italian military authorities’. According to other information, it appears that the mission at Doro had had at no time any communication with the Italian military authorities.

“At about 9:15 a. m. on August 23, 1940 members of the mission station at Doro were attracted by the sound of aircraft engines. Upon an observation of the sky, two aircraft were to be seen about a mile distant flying apparently in a westerly direction along and over the approximate course of the Yabus River, whose nearest point is about a mile from the southern boundary of the mission compound.

“As a result of the noise made by the aircraft engines, Dr. and Mrs. Grieve and the Reverend and Mrs. Oglesby

left their houses and stood together on the open ground to observe the airplanes. Miss Walsh was standing on the porch along the south side of her house.

"Suddenly the two airplanes changed their course toward the compound. As they did so, Dr. Grieve and Mr. Oglesby held extended a United States flag, measuring some six by four feet, while their wives stood a little distance south of them.

"The two aircraft, flying one after the other, crossed the southern boundary of the compound at a height of not more than one thousand feet, possibly less, inasmuch as the details of the planes were plainly distinguishable from the ground. In an affidavit of Mr. Oglesby the aircraft are described as Italian single-engined bi-planes. It is added that the vertical tricolor national markings were painted upon the tail fins of the aircraft.

"When the aircraft were only a short distance from the four Americans standing in the open, the second airplane, flying slightly to the west of the airplane in the lead, dived toward the group discharging its bombs. There were three almost simultaneous explosions.

"The airplanes flew over the eastern corner of Miss Walsh's house in a northeasterly direction, passing over the native village where at least two more bombs were dropped which fell in the fields.

"Dr. and Mrs. Grieve were struck by the first bombs, Dr. Grieve having fallen partly covered by the United States flag, which was perforated by shrapnel or bomb splinters in no less than twenty-four places. Mr. and Mrs. Oglesby were wounded, Mr. Oglesby only slightly in the shoulders, but Mrs. Oglesby had sustained about thirty small shrapnel wounds on the arms and in the back with three major wounds in the legs and was still reported suffering from mental shock as late as October 21, 1940.

"The airplanes almost immediately afterward returned and dropped a considerable additional number of bombs. They then departed in an easterly direction.

"When the airplanes had finally departed Mr. and Mrs. Oglesby were assisted into their house, while Dr. and Mrs. Grieve were carried into the clinic. Dr. Grieve died at

about 10:30 a. m. and Mrs. Grieve that same day about 5:30 p. m.

"Altogether a considerable number of bombs, some high explosive and some incendiary, were dropped in or around the mission compound. The first salvo of three bombs were high explosive or shrapnel bombs while an incendiary bomb destroyed a house belonging to the Reverend and Mrs. Oglesby.

"From the above facts it is clear that:

"The airplanes making the attack were Italian, in accordance with the sworn statements of two eye-witnesses.

"The Italian military authorities at Kurmuk had knowledge prior to the attack on Doro of the presence there of American missionaries and of their non-combatant character.

"Doro is an open undefended village with no military or police posts or any military works of any character.

"The attack on Doro by Italian airplanes was consequently a deliberate and wanton assault on a non-military objective and on non-combatant civilians, including four American citizens.

"My Government is confident that the Royal Italian Government will promptly condemn the acts of those responsible for the brutal unprovoked attack against the four American citizens concerned and that prompt steps will be taken to punish those guilty of an outrage shocking to all those who continue to preserve any respect for the principles of civilized behavior. My Government must of course make full reservations concerning the subsequent entering of claims for compensation for the killing of Dr. and Mrs. Grieve, the wounding of the Reverend and Mrs. Oglesby and for any property damage suffered by American interests."

The following interim reply, dated November 6, 1940, was received from the Foreign Office by the Embassy at Rome:

"Detailed information in the premises has been requested of the competent military authorities.

"However, as it relates to facts supposed to have occurred more than two months ago in a distant locality it is very

probable that a report on the matter cannot be received for sometime.

"Much more expeditious procedure on the part of North America [*sic*] would have been to have requested information concerning the bombardments in question simultaneously from Cairo and from Rome.

"That among other things would probably have resulted in a composition different from your note of November 1 which in its concluding portion contains criticisms of the Italian armed forces which cannot but be rejected *in toto*."

No further communication on the subject has been received from the Italian Government.