JACK CHURCHILL
'UNLIMITED BOLDNESS'
BY
REX KING-CLARK

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"There is a pleasure sure
In being Mad, which none
but madmen know" – Dryden

Contents

PART ONE

That he was intelligent, realistic, knowledgeable on a wide range of subjects - some distinctly esoteric - none will deny; that he was by nature an individualist, a romantic, an eccentric of startling style and initiative and, above all, in war, a formidable fighting man, is equally undeniable.

The Press in World War II, realising that the exploitation of these latter qualities, coupled with his flair for ‘unlimited boldness', would prove more newsworthy than the former, christened him ‘Mad Jack' - and the title stuck!

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Jack's attitude to, and performance in, World War II was, in fact, simply an extension of the zest for living he had shown in the years prior to 1939, with the advantage of more opportunities for adventure on offer.

To appreciate more fully his wartime record it will, perhaps, help if I recount a little of his background and some of his more unique activities during those pre-war years.

John Malcolm Thorpe Fleming Churchill, a member of an Oxfordshire family with a distinguished pedigree, was born in 1906, the eldest of three sons of Alec and Elinor Churchill. His father was for many years Director of Public Works, Hong Kong. After the Dragon School, Oxford and King William's College, Isle of Man, followed by Sandhurst, Jack was commissioned into the Manchester Regiment on 4th February 1926. He served with its 2nd Battalion in Burma and India between 1926 and 1932, including service in the 1930-32 Rebellion in Burma, for which he received the Indian General Service Medal with Burma clasp - his first ribbon. (1)

He was at that time - and continued to be throughout his lifetime - a keen motor-cyclist. In April 1927, at the end of a Signals Course in Poona, to which he had been sent from Rangoon and whither he had taken, as company, his 1923 OHV Zenith bike, he decided to ride the 1500 miles across India to catch the boat at Calcutta to return to his Battalion. The ride, almost certainly never attempted before on a motor-cycle, came to a halt near Indore, in Central India, when he ran into a water buffalo, which had bolted across his bows bringing his journey to a temporary halt -though he later completed the journey.

In Burma, in 1926, also on the Zenith, he had driven down the railway line - there was no road

1. His younger brother, Tom, followed Jack into the Manchesters and served with him *Burma, and, in 1944, in the Adriatic, as his brigade commander. Tom retired in 1962 as Major General T.B.L. Churchill, CB CBE MC. Jack's younger brother, Buster, was killed in action off Malta while serving as a pilot with the Fleet Air Arm.*

from Maymyo, via Mandalay to Rangoon - some five hundred miles - to visit ‘a friend'. "It was the bridges over the numerous kyaungs (river beds) that were the problem," Jack once told me. "There was nothing between the sleepers so I had to steer the bike by hand along a rail, while I stepped from sleeper to sleeper." But he made it”

While staying with the Cameron Highlanders at Maymyo Jack was enchanted by the Regiment's pipe band and became a pupil of their fine pipe major. Later, back in England, he was tutored by Donald Fraser, an ex-pipe major of the Seaforths, who had piped at the battle of Tel-el-Kebir in Egypt in 1882. In due course Jack became an outstanding performer on the great highland war pipe.

In 1932, Jack was posted home, rejoining, in 1934, the 2nd Manchesters at Strensall, near York, at the conclusion of the Battalion's fourteen-year foreign tour - in Burma, India, the Andaman Islands, the Sudan and Cyprus. It was in the Manchesters at Strensall in that year, via my Scottish school (Loretto) and Sandhurst, that I first met Jack and we became firm friends in the subaltern style

Two years later, in 1936, after ten years service, Jack, aged twenty-nine, resigned his commission. It would not be unfair to say that his attitude to soldiering at that time was, as Dryden puts it:

> *"Pleased with the danger, when the waves went high, He sought the storms but for a calm unfit”*

Perhaps certain eccentricities - brought on no doubt through frustration - such as piping the orderly officer to the Guard Room at three o'clock of a morning and studying the wrong pre-set Campaign in preparation for his promotion exam, precluded any chance of promotion for the time being and made the break, after a chat with his commanding officer, inevitable

In August 1936 I was involved in an aeroplane accident. After the hospital had released me, the Army sent me off on several months' sick leave. At a loss as to what to do with so much free time, I asked Jack to join me in a thrash through Europe in my car. Jack jumped at the idea and from October 1936 to January 1937 we managed to get involved (as recounted elsewhere) in a series of escapades - some hilarious, some, to me, alarming in the extreme - all at Jack's instigation - and all helped by our kilts and the pipes! It was this expedition that first brought home to me the stuff that Jack was really made of.

For the next two years - which I spent with our overseas battalion, the 1st Manchesters - Jack, back home, involved himself in a not-altogether successful commercial venture touching on the Spanish Civil War; continued to pipe so successfully that he was placed second in the Officers Class of the Piping Championships held during the Aldershot Tattoo in June 1938 - the only Englishman out of some seventy entrants (the Daily Mirror headline read ‘Englishman beats many Scots pipers' - a kind of 'man bites dog’ item), and developed his skill at archery (which he had taken up as a hobby while at the Regimental Depot on his return from Burma) to the extent that

he was selected as a member of the British team for the World Archery Championships in Oslo in 1939. He got back to England from this event only just in time to follow his true vocation, War.

During the Phoney War - September 1939 to 10th May 1940 - Jack and I both served in the BEF with the 2nd Manchesters - the 1st Corps machine gun battalion placed under command of the 2nd Division-digging defences we were never to use along the Belgian frontier with France. We would visit each other regularly at our respective company HQs, drink black velvet (stout and champagne at about 25p a bottle) and talk over old times and times to come. Occasionally we would make a foray into the night life of Lille, which, during those strange, eerie months, was pretty hectic.

In December 1939, Jack went off with D Company, of which he was second-in-command, for a tour of duty alongside the French Army in the Maginot Line. His patrol activity against the German outposts with his bow and war arrows during that bitterly cold winter is part of toxophilite history. Following this, he disappeared for a while, as a volunteer, into the force raised to assist the Finns against the Russian invasion of their country. This gave him a pleasant couple of weeks ski-training in Chamonix and a trip home before the expedition was cancelled.

He was back with the Manchesters for the German invasion of Holland and Belgium on 10th May 1940 - and it was at this point that Jack, as in Charles Douglas-Home's description of Rommel (1), truly became 'a man possessed, sustained almost to addiction by the adrenalin of war. His subsequent wartime career was, in truth, quite astonishing.

Essentially an individualist, Jack, during dangerous ploys, preferred to have with him only his chosen few - 'half-backs' to his own position as 'striker' - whom he knew would react as he did. He believed, with reason, that, in attack, a very small bold force, with the benefit of bluff, could often achieve greater penetration than a much larger but more lethargic body. However, he did not always keep in mind, in his enthusiasm, that the larger body would be needed, eventually, to complete the business and hold the ground gained. Or, if he did appreciate this, as commander he was rarely in a position to arrange it since, more likely than not, Jack, sword literally in hand (he had made it a personal rule always to wear his sword into battle), would be leading the attack with his 'halfbacks' at his shoulder and no one else in sight.

In defence, one cannot say more than that, if a position became untenable, he was the last to leave it - and never without a Parthian shot.

For me, as a chronicler, Jack's active war has five highlight episodes - a mix of the serious and light-hearted, The first was his performance in the latter half of May 1940 during the retreat to Dunkirk from the BEF's positions on the River Dyle, east of Brussels. Early in the three-week campaign, Tommy Woolsey (later Lieutenant Colonel E.F. Woolsey DSO), his company commander, was wounded

1 Rommel by Charles Douglas-Home (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973)

and Jack took over command of D Company.

His outstanding achievement during the retreat, for which he was awarded the Military Cross, occurred on 27th May 1940. On that day, commanding a small, mixed force of Manchesters and other units of 4th Infantry Brigade, he held the village of l'Epinette, near Bethune, against a strong enemy attack. But what gave the action a particular Jack Churchill touch was the, use of his longbow. As Donald Featherstone described it in his book *The Bowmen of England:* "Climbing into the loft of a small granary (in l'Epinette)... Captain Churchill saw, some thirty yards away, five Germans sheltering behind the wall but in clear view of the granary ... Captain Churchill lifted his bow, took careful aim and loosed the shaft to see his arrow strike the centre German in the left side of his chest and penetrate his body." Later the War Diary of HQ 4th Infantry Brigade, dated 30th May 1940, recorded: "One of the most reassuring sights of the embarkation was the sight of Captain Churchill passing down the (Dunkirk) beach with his bows and arrows. His high example and his great work.... were a great help to the 4th Infantry Brigade."

Soon after the action at l'Epinette (the news of which had not yet reached me) I was sitting, chatting to a gunner officer, outside a small roadside estaminet with the remnants of my company around me, when a small moto-bicyclette came puttering towards us along the road running through the flat, deserted, Flanders fields.

It was still some distance away when I recognised, in the sunlight of that spring of glorious weather, the pale hair and fierce moustache of the rider. I ran onto the dusty road waving my arms. The bike stopped just short of me. "Jack!" I shouted. He grinned back, the creases in his face accentuated by grime.. "Ah! Hullo Clark! Got anything to drink?" - and he pulled the bike up onto its stand and joined us at the table, his strong hands, dark with dust, relaxing into his lap.

I looked over to the bike. His longbow was tied along the frame; in one rear-wheel pannier I could see the rim of his steel helmet; from the other protruded the shafts and feathered flights of several arrows. Over the headlamp hung a German Officer's cap - a relic, Jack told us, of his action at l'Epinette. While he was talking, I noticed there was dried blood on the lobe of his left ear and on his neck. "What's that?" I asked - and he recounted how, earlier that day, when an enemy machine-gun had begun to fire bursts down a village street he was walking across, his men, behind a wall on the far side, had yelled at him run. "But I couldn't", he said, "I was too tired" - and a bullet had nicked his ear.

It was at about the end of June 1940 - a few weeks after the Dunkirk evacuation - which, by courtesy of the Royal Navy, included, among many others, both Jack and myself - that volunteers for what became the Commandos were called for throughout the Army in Britain. The response was immediate. Jack was probably the first volunteer; this was just his cup of tea

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The second episode - with comic opera overtones - was the part he played in his first Commando operation - the raid on Vaagso (a group of small inshore islands at the mouth of the great Nord

Fjord on the West coast of Norway at latitude 62° N - some 250 miles NE of the Shetlands) on 27th December 1941, where he led in the two troops of No.3 Commando in the assault on the heavily defended coast battery on Maaloy Island. Having played his landing craft into shore to the tune of "The March of the Cameron Men" on his pipes (much to the subsequent delight of the Press), he leapt ashore, sword in hand, and disappeared into the smoke-screen already laid by Hampdens of the Royal Air Force. Fortunately, surprise was complete and the island was captured without difficulty. While celebrating the success from a case of Moselle found in the German commanding officer's hut, a demolition charge exploded nearby. The bottle broke in his hand and a piece of glass gashed his forehead deeply. The public at home were pleased with the result of the raid and Jack came in for considerable personal publicity to which he was not averse. His 'wound' healed quickly - too quickly, in fact. "I had to touch it up from time to time with Rosamund's - his wife's - lipstick to keep the wounded hero' story going," he told me later.

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The third episode covers a very different occasion - and one that is already well documented. It concerns Jack's achievement, in September 1943, during the Salerno landing, the main Anglo-American assault upon Italy. At the time he was in command of No.2 Commando. On the night of 15th September Jack was ordered by the commander of 167 Infantry Brigade, under whose command he had come that day, to make a raid, with the aim of taking prisoners, up the valley towards Pigoletti, a village, strongly held by the Germans, situated on a ridge at the head of a steep, thickly wooded valley.

Jack, sword in hand, with his ‘half-back', Corporal Ruffell, following 20 yards behind, outstripped the rest of his men and, in the darkness, entered the village unnoticed by the enemy

He wrote to me later: "After capturing the first double sentry post, I handed one of the sentries over to Ruffell, put the slip knot of my revolver lanyard round the other one's neck and, with the point of my sword in his back, went and rounded up the remaining sentries - the Hun identifying himself each time when challenged - captured Pigoletti and the entire garrison of forty-two plus a 81 mm mortar and crew." Leaving the remains of one of his Troops in Pigoletti under Joe Nichol, the only surviving officer (later the Chaplain of Stowe School), Jack, with two commando soldiers, then marched the forty odd prisoners back down the steep hill to the Brigade area.

Later he told me, "I always bring my prisoners back with their weapons; it weighs them down. I just took their rifle bolts out and put them in a sack, which one of the prisoners carried. The prisoners also carried the mortar and all the bombs they could carry and also pulled a farm cart with five wounded in it. When we got back, I fed them with our men as if they were another troop and then sent them, along with the prisoners the other troops had captured - about a hundred in all - to the rudimentary POW cage which was virtually empty. The splendid Huns settled down to sleep after setting up their mortar with the bombs around it and carefully piling their rifles. I was told afterwards that, the next morning, they got down keenly to cleaning the mortar

The evening of 15th September 1943 on the Salerno beachhead - shortly before No.2 Commando's attack up the hill to Pigoletti. Jack is nearest the Camera (N.B. the hilt of his claymore above his haversack). Lieutenant-General Dick McCreery, Commander, 10th Corps, is seen pointing out the objectives with Brigadier Firth, Commander 167 Brigade of 56 (London) Division on his left and Lieutenant Colonel Cleghorne, commanding 9th Royal Fusiliers, on the far left, drinking a mug of tea.

and their rifles after the night's dew. When the elderly dug-out who ran the (empty) POW cage appeared after breakfast he was riveted to find it fairly full. 'What was going on?' he complained to McCreary who roared with laughter.''

Jack continued: "I maintain that, as long as you tell a German loudly and clearly what to do, if you are senior to him he will cry 'jawohl' and get on with it enthusiastically and efficiently whatever the surrounding situation. That is why they make such marvellous soldiers! "(What Evelyn Waugh, I seem to remember, called 'The negative joy of obedience'!)

Jack, having sent the prisoners to the cage, returned at about 1.0 am - with no rest - to the steep ridge at Pigoletti, where, over the next few days, there was "much tough fighting and counter attack, and we had quite a lot killed including the Duke of Wellington, who was in my Commando." In fact, Hilary St. George Saunders relates in his book *The Green Beret,(1)* that 2 Commando and 41 Royal Marine Commando suffered 'three hundred and sixty-seven killed, wounded or missing out of the seven hundred and thirty-eight officers and men who fought at Salerno between 9th and 19th September 1943 - almost half their strength.' We lost no prisoners.

I have always understood that Jack was recommended for the Victoria Cross (4) for his outstanding performances at Pigoletti on the 15th September - which, it has been said, saved the Salerno beachhead at a critical time. Somewhere along the line - perhaps because of the individualistic nature of his achievement (Jack himself described it as 'a bit Errol Flynn-ish!) - it was diluted to a DSO. Whether this is true or not, VCs have certainly been awarded for lesser deeds of valour.

The fourth episode spans the period from June 1944 to April 1945. On the night of 3/4th June 1944, Jack was taken prisoner during the assault on the Island of Brac (2) on the Dalmatian Coast, launched from the nearby island of Vis. This latter island was the 2nd Special Service Brigade's base in the Adriatic, from which, together with Yugoslav partisan forces, it was harassing and tying down German formations on the coast. Jack's part in this operation is described in detail in Hilary St. George Saunders' book. It tells how Jack, in command of the assault force and in company with a very large Yugoslav partisan unit, led the night attack on Hill 622, the key feature, playing his pipes at the head of 40 Royal Marine Commando (commanded by Lieutenant Colonel J.C. (Tops') Manners DSO, who was killed at Jack's side. Under heavy machine gun and mortar

1 *Published by Michael Joseph in 1949.*
2 *Brac, lying some seven miles off the mainland port of Split, is the third largest island in the Adriatic. It is some twenty-five miles long and ten miles wide.*
3 *For this and other outstanding support to the Yugoslav cause, Tito, some years after the war, decorated both Jack and his brother, Tom, with the Yugoslav Partisan Star.*
4 *Editor's note: A copy of this recommendation is held by Col Jack Churchill's son Malcolm.*

Komiza Harbour by Harold Garland © H Garland

"To the Yugoslav people, in honour of President J B Tito, and his National Liberation Army, from the British Coastal Forces Veterans Association."

Presented by Rear Admiral Morgan Giles, DSO, OBE, GM, RN on 2nd April 1981.

Komiza, the port at the Western end of the Island of Vis, was the Headquarters of 2nd Special Service Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Tom Churchill (Jack's brother), and of the Royal Navy Coastal Force units - mostly MGBS, MTBs and MLs. Lieutenant Commander Morgan Giles was the senior Royal Navy officer in Vis- dubbed SNOVIS.

The Brigade HQ was set up in March 1944. Jack Churchill had arrived in the Island in January and, with his No.2 Commando group, had already carried out a number of raids on nearby islands, especially against Hvar.

The assault on Brac, during which Jack was wounded and captured, was mounted from Komiza, escorted by RN Coastal Force. Angus Sillars, a friend and neighbour of the author, was an officer on board one of the escorting MGBs. While lying offshore during the action they heard Jack's pipes and gathered the assault had failed. When the news came that 'Colonel Jack' had been captured, Coastal Forces hoped it might be able to intercept his transfer to the mainland. However, they were unsuccessful in spotting the small, armed motor launch, in which Jack was carried, during the night of 6th June, from Supetar on the north coast of Brac, eastward to Makarska on the mainland.

This photograph was taken at HQ 118 Jager Division in the hills near Mostar on the mainland of Yugoslavia on 6th June 1944. Jack had been taken there by launch and car from Brac on the first stage of his journey to Berlin. It was only three days after his capture by the Germans. 'Pops' Manners' blood can still be seen on his left forearm. Jack is holding a battledress blouse, which had belonged to one of his four killed captains - given to him by the Germans, since he was cold.

The helmet he is wearing is from a dead Royal Marine; his own tin hat, covered with a net and with the 2 Commando badge pinned on the front, had been gashed by the splinter which had knocked him out and cut his hand. Jack had dropped off his rank badges and medal ribbons while being escorted to the German HQ, thinking escape might be easier if he said he was of lower rank. However, he decided against it when eleven rank and file, mostly Royal Marines from Y Troop, 40 Commando, joined him.

Wilhelm Heinz is the German officer facing the camera. It was he who sent Jack the photograph and, a Quarter of a century later, arranged his visit to the 1979 Rally of the 118 Jager Division in Austria.

fire the main attack failed, Jack lay on the summit with a small group of Royal Marines; he then rolled onto his back and "setting his pipes to his lips played 'Will ye no come back again?". Finally, stunned by a 'flurry of grenades', he and half-a-dozen other survivors were seized by men of the German 118th Jager Division (1), which garrisoned the island.

Jack - after being taken to Mostar, on the mainland, by motor launch and car - was subsequently interrogated, with firm courtesy, by Major General Keubler, the divisional commander (who could not be persuaded that Jack was not a relation to Winston Churchill), had his sword and pipes confiscated (2), and was flown, by Fieseler Storch and Heinkel III, to Berlin - but not before writing a characteristic ‘bread-and-butter’ letter to his captors.

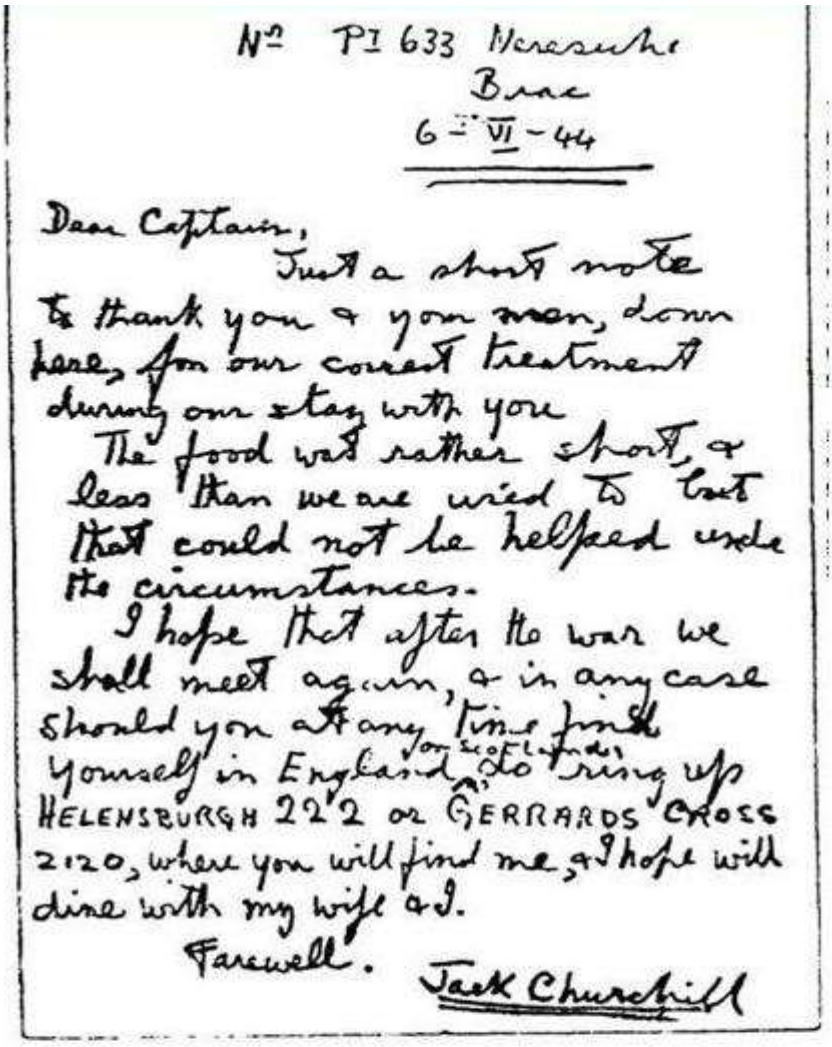
In Berlin he was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen concentration camp, being handcuffed and chained to the floor for the first month. His fellow-prisoners included Schuschnigg, the former Chancellor of Austria, Dr. Hjalmar Schacht, the former German Finance Minister, and von Thyssen, the industrialist.

However, not satisfied with prison life, Jack, together with Squadron Leader James (3), a Royal Air Force officer, tunnelled their way under the compound and outer wall of the camp, emerging into the gutter of the road outside and, on 23rd September 1944', set off along the railway towards the Baltic coast. However, in the very dense mist of an early morning, when approaching Rostock, they ran into a work gang which chased them over a high wire fence. Running on they climbed a further barrier, only, having scaled it, to find that it was the internal fence of the workers' camp -and that they were once more 'inside'.

Recaptured, they were later moved south to Niederdorf in Austria, with a group of other prisoners. Ever the opportunist, Jack, on the night of 20th April 1945, when the floodlights failed, walked away, alone, from an outside working party. He continued walking - living on soup made from vegetables gathered from allotments and gardens and cooked in the small, rusty tin which, with onions and matches, he had kept hidden in his jacket for this eventual use - crossing the Alps at the Brenner Pass, keeping wherever possible between the roads and the snowline, with Verona, in Italy, some hundred and fifty miles away, as his objective.

On the eighth day, however, with a sprained ankle and many miles to go, he spotted, on the road far below him, an armoured column, on whose vehicles, to his wild relief and surprise, he could just discern the American white star marking. Running madly, dot-and-carry, down the hillside, he managed to stop one of the last vehicles of the column,

1 *In 1979, Jack and his wife, Rosamund, attended, as guests of honour, the bi-annual rally of the 118th Jager Division at Graz in Austria - a unique distinction and experience.*
2 His claymore and pipes were subsequently exhibited in the South-East Front room in The War Museum in Vienna
3 Sqn Ldr ‘Jimmie’ James MC was one of those recaptured after the ‘Great Escape’’ from Stalag Luft III who was not murdered, but transferred to a concentration camp.



Nr PI 633 Neresiche
Brac
6 VI - 44

Dear Captain,
Just a short note to thank you & your men, down here, for our correct treatment during our stay with you.
The food was rather short, & less than we are used to but that could not be helped under the circumstances.
I hope that after the war we shall meet again, & in any case should you at any time find yourself in England, do ring up HELENSBURGH 222 or GERRARDS CROSS 2120, where you will find me, & I hope will dine with my wife & I.
Farewell.
Jack Churchill

This is Jack's bread and butter letter, written in pencil three days after his capture and just before his despatch to Berlin. The nearest I can get to Jack's 'Neresiche' on a modern map is Nerezisca, a village in the west centre of BRAC.

Pt 623 (Jack's Pt 633 and Saunder's Hill 622) marked Visoka, is about three miles due south of Nerezisca on the high ground overlooking the southern shore of the island. The German officer to whom Jack had given the note was a Hauptman Hans Thorner. Later the note saved Thorner's life when the Yugoslavs wanted to have him shot as a war criminal.

a tank. It took some time for the American occupants to credit that this dishevelled scarecrow, dressed in RAF serge uniform, was Colonel Churchill of the British Army. As he told me later, "I couldn't walk very well and was so out of breath I could scarcely talk, but I still managed a credible Sandhurst salute, which may have done the trick."

*** * ***

My fifth and final Jack Churchill wartime episode provided me with the Big Laugh.

Shortly after Jack's escape, the war in Europe ended, leaving him with an intense sense of frustration at having missed some of the action and the chance of getting the promotion he had, with good reason, hoped for - command of a Commando Brigade. "However, there are still the Nips, aren't there?" he was asking his friends.

In the meantime, the 2nd Manchesters (which, by now, I was commanding) were stationed, with most of the 2nd Division, in a remote camp some seventy miles north of Secunderabad in the middle of India, having been flown out of Burma a few weeks previously. It was while we were there - on 18th August 1945 - that everything, thankfully, came to a halt following the fall of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

A few days later, to my astonished delight, I got a personal signal from Jack from Bombay, whither, it transpired, he had recently arrived as second-in-command of 3 Commando Brigade. 'RV Bombay Yacht Club soonest' it read. Quickly wangling a few days leave, I whipped up to Bombay and, on the evening of my arrival, positioned myself confidently in the bar. Sure enough - eventually - Jack, in the immaculate tropical uniform of a full colonel, splendid with the ribbons of the DSO and bar, and MC, strolled in.

"Jack!!"

"Hullo, Clark!"

It was a great moment and, I seem to remember, we actually shook hands.

"Let's have a drink," said Jack ('Drinking is the Soldier's Pleasure' - Dryden again). "We've got a long agenda to cover."

As we lifted our first burra pegs, I asked him how he was keeping.

"Fine-o-fine," he replied - and paused; "but you know, Rex, if it hadn't been for those damned Yanks we could have kept the war going for another ten years!"

*** * ***

To try to sum up, Jack Churchill, though in war a remarkable and inspiring leader, did not always, I believe, appear entirely sympathetic to the average soldier. During the three-week Dunkirk campaign - the first of the war - he was, I know, genuinely surprised

and disappointed to discover that all men were not as fearless as he. Perhaps Jack never fully appreciated the earnest desire of the average soldier to live to fight another day, or that the 'squaddie' follows most happily the leader who respects, within the scope of events this basic sentiment.

Jack once sent me a postcard with the Regimental Colours pictured on it. On the reverse he had written:

'No *Prince or Lord has tomb so proud as*
he whose flag becomes his shroud."

.

However, as with others of that small, curious band of battlefield genii, this destiny was denied him and, in fact, he survived both the war and subsequent adventures - virtually unscathed -achieved in the main by facing danger calmly and, indeed, with interest, and not by hiding or blindly running away from it

PART TWO

- "People are less likely to shoot at you if you smile at them." -

In August 1945, when World War II ended, Jack was rising 39 and just getting into his stride -though hampered by the lack of fighting available. However, there were other avenues to be explored, for one the art of parachuting. So, as a start, at the age of forty, he trained for and gained his 'parachute wings.' (1) He also at this time transferred from the Manchesters to the Seaforth Highlanders but, though I told him straight that I considered this to be a retrograde step on his part (to which, I clearly recall, he made no reply), I could, nevertheless, recognize the need he had felt over the years for a deeper association with Scotland - accentuated during the war by commando training in the Highlands.

His first appointment in the Highland Brigade was commanding the demonstration company of the 2nd Seaforths at the School of Infantry at Warminster in Wiltshire. When, in 1948, the 2nd Battalions of all infantry regiments were disbanded, he was appointed second-in-command of the 1st Highland Light Infantry - the old 71st - in Jerusalem.

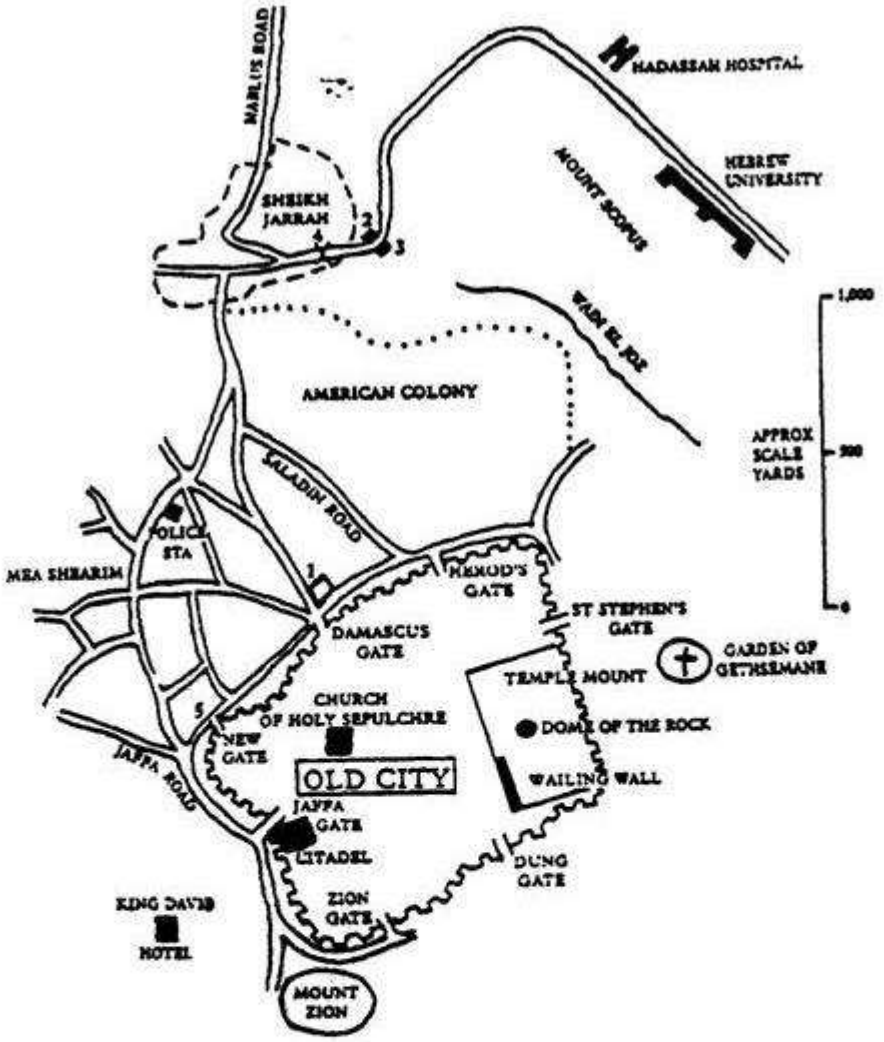
The situation in Palestine at that time was very delicate. The termination, due in mid-May 1948, of Britain's twenty-five year mandate over the country (set up by the League of Nations after the Great War) and the imminent establishment of the State of Israel, created tensions resulting in widespread acts of terrorism, both by Jewish extremists against the British and between Arab and Jew, especially in and around Jerusalem, the spiritual and political focus of both nations

It was in one of these latter encounters, in Jerusalem, that Jack, again virtually single-handed, offered to rescue a Jewish convoy of doctors, nurses and patients in ambulances (marked with a red Star of David), buses and lorries, ambushed between two mine craters in a narrow street in the Arab quarter of Sheik Jarrah. The convoy was bound for the ultra-modern Hadassah Hospital and the Hebrew University, both situated on Mount Scopus overlooking the Old City - a journey of some two miles from the Jewish road-block at Mea Shearim

The date was Tuesday, 13th April 1948 - one month and a day before the British Mandate in Palestine was due to expire

Jack was the first senior officer at the scene of the ambush. He had been on a battalion inspection parade at the 1st Highland Light Infantry's barracks in St. Paul's

1. *Jack later commanded the 5th (Scottish) Parachute Battalion: The Only officer to ever command both a Commando and a Parachute regiment.*



Hadassah Massacre; A Rough sketch map of part of Jerusalem. 13 April 1948

1 HLI Barracks (St Paul's German Hospice)
2 Tony's Post (Mrs Katy Antonius' house)
3 Mufti's House (Arab Stronghold)
4 Site of Mount Scopus Convoy Ambush
5 Hospice Notre Dame de France

German Hospice in Jerusalem when he had seen a soldier on the edge of the parade ground wildly waving a piece of paper. Jack, who, as second-in-command, was part of the inspecting party walked over to the soldier, who turned out to be a signals orderly with a wireless message from Tony's post in Sheikh Jarrah(1). The signal stated that the Jewish Hadassah convoy had been ambushed by the Arabs below the Post, the road had been mined and that much firing was going on. The signal was timed 0930 hours.

Jack returned to the parade, asked the Regimental Sergeant Major to tell the Commanding Officer, when he got the chance, that there was trouble at Tony's Post and that he, Jack, was going off to see what was happening. Having collected his Dingo (2) and its driver, Jack quickly drove the short mile to Tony's Post, approaching it from the back over a hill using the vehicle's four wheel drive. He then climbed onto the roof of the Post, whence he could look down on the scene of the ambush. This was in full swing about a hundred yards away, with much firing by the Arabs from the houses below on the far side of the road, and to a lesser extent from the Jewish guards in the convoy. Jack also spotted large numbers of Arabs, many armed, swarming up the Wadi el Joz (Valley of the Walnut), below the Arab stronghold of Sheikh Jarrah, to join those in the houses.

Jack - the realist - appreciating that "a major Arab/Jewish punch-up" was imminent, at once wirelessed direct to HQ 2nd Infantry Brigade in Jerusalem (the telephone line having been cut by the mine), explained the situation and asked for an artillery observation officer and two 25-pounder field guns to be put at his disposal immediately to blast the Arab gunmen from their ambush positions in the houses. "I need real guns", he said, "not machine guns."

However, Brigade HQ, no doubt startled by such an unorthodox demand and, moreover, desperately anxious at the virtual end of the British Mandate, to steer a middle course between Arab and Jew, turned down his request. Jack, having explained that a very dangerous situation was developing and that some action would have to be taken if the Jews were to be saved, then asked for two Staghounds - large armoured cars with a gun and machine gun - and this was agreed. He was told, however, that it would take some time to get these back from their convoy protection duties elsewhere. "But for Christ's sake try and avoid using their guns," added the staff officer.

1 *Tony's Post was a small HLI strongpoint in Sheikh Jarrah. The house belonged to Mrs Katy Antonius - hence its name. It was almost opposite one of the principal Arab strongholds known as The Mufti's House.' (Mrs Antonius may have been related to George Antonius, a Christian Arab and the author of The Arab Awakening, an outstanding book on modern Arab nationalists (1939).)*
2 *This was a small armoured reconnaissance vehicle, which had been handed into an ordnance depot by the cavalry. Its turret had been removed for repair but it still gave some protection if one kept one's head down. Jack had somehow acquired it for the Battalion for use in 'dicey areas.'*

"It's only for their cannons I want them," Jack replied.

As there was nothing he could do in the meantime at Tony's Post - which consisted merely of a subaltern officer and about fifteen Jocks with no heavy weapons and only a very limited sortie capacity - but, nevertheless, feeling some responsibility as the man on the spot (1), Jack decided to try to rescue some of the Jews trapped in their buses and lorries by using one of his battalion's big, GMC armoured personnel carriers (APC). Accordingly, having first warned Battalion HQ by wireless to have the vehicles ready, he went back himself in his Dingo to the transport lines and collected an APC with a bren gun carrier to act as escort. With these two vehicles, and a small police armoured car with a light automatic he picked up on the way back, he returned to the ambush area. On arrival, he positioned the bren carrier and police armoured car at the Sheikh Jarrah hairpin corner some fifty yards from the trapped convoy, from where they could cover, with their machine guns, the Arab houses and both sides of the road. The APC he placed behind them.

Jack - the romantic now! - then got out of his Dingo and walked about thirty yards, alone, down the road to the Jewish vehicles, in full view of the Arab gunmen in the houses. Later he told me: "As I walked along, swinging my blackthorn walking stick, I grinned like mad from side to side, as people are less likely to shoot at you if you smile at them. Of course, having come straight off a battalion parade, I was very dressed up - in glengarry, tunic, Sam Browne belt (but no claymore, worse luck!) kilt, hair sporran and red and white diced hose - and white spats! This outfit in the middle of the battle, together with my grinning at them, may have made the Arabs laugh because most of them have a sense of humour. Anyway, they didn't shoot me!"

Having arrived at the Jewish buses, he hammered with his blackthorn on the door of the nearest one. A woman's voice called out, "What is that?" Jack replied, "This is Major Churchill of the Highland Light Infantry. I am here with a big, powerful armoured vehicle and I can evacuate you from this bus and each of the other buses in turn if you would like to come - but there may be casualties when you transfer from one to the other. Do you understand that?"(2): The woman replied, "Yes, but are you going to drive the Arabs off first?" "No," said Jack. "I cannot do that; I have only twelve men and there are hundreds of Arabs." "Well, I will have to talk to Dr. Yassky (3) or somebody else," said

1 *Jack had himself framed the standing orders for HLI strongpoints - on 26th March 1948. These included instructions to prevent fighting between Jews and Arabs as far as possible; if fighting occurred to try to stop it by opening fire on the aggressor; if a Jewish convoy were ambushed by Arabs, to drive off the latter by fire, if possible - but, overall, to avoid at all times exposing British troops to Jew or Arab fire.*
2 *Jack told me later that he said this to cover himself in case there were subsequent complaints about Jewish casualties.*
3 *Dr Chaim Yassky was the Director of Hadassah Hospital and a world-renowned ophthalmologist. He was killed in the ambush. His wife, Fanny, was one of the very few survivors.*

the woman and Jack heard them talking together in Hebrew. After a few moments Jack called out, "Hurry up and decide; it is very dangerous for me outside here." Shortly afterwards the reply came from inside, "Thank you very much but we do not want your help. The Jewish Army - the Haganah - will save us." Jack walked to the other buses repeating his offer and adding that it was their last chance of help from the British and, if they did not accept, it was likely they would all be killed. But in each case the reply was the same - "No thank you; the Haganah will save us."

As he was leaving the buses the HLI Bren carrier driver, who was some seventy-five yards away, shouted out that his bren gunner, Private Hutton, had been hit and was dying. Jack again shouted to the Jews in the buses: "Look! One of my men has been killed, so I am leaving at once. You are on your own." They called out, "Yes! Yes!" and Jack ran back to his vehicles and sent the APC and the bren carrier, with the dying soldier, back to the HLI lines. He then went to Tony's Post, which continued to support the trapped vehicles with small arms fire against the Arabs. This fire from Tony's Post and from the small Jewish escort trapped into the convoy for a time prevented the Arabs from directly assaulting the vehicles.

But that was the end of the affair as far as direct intervention in the ambush by the British Army was concerned. Personal help had been offered to the ambushed convoy by Jack Churchill, personifying the Army, and had been refused. The convoy could, in fact, have had, by prior request, a British Army escort, but the Jews had, in recent weeks, become grossly overconfident in their ability to look after themselves - which was, in fact, the root cause of the Sheikh Jarrah tragedy.

After Jack and his vehicles had left the scene, the Arabs, who, by this time, were very numerous in the houses, became emboldened and very noisy, finally setting the Jewish buses on fire with Molotov cocktails and shooting the occupants as they left. By mid-afternoon on 13th April 1948, seventy-seven Jews lay dead. So badly burned and unrecognizable were the bodies from the buses that their remains were buried in a common grave (1). A further twenty-five Jews were wounded. Only eight of the one hundred and ten men and women who had set out in the Hadas-sah convoy that Tuesday morning escaped unhurt. When the British armoured cars eventually arrived at 1530 hours they could do little more than survey the carnage. The men of the Highland Light Infantry (which had suffered two killed and three wounded) worked far into the night clearing the bodies, vehicles and debris from the site of the massacre (2)

As the latter half of April went by, sniping and general harassment made life for the Jews on

1 *A marble monument stands today near the site of the ambush: it lists seventy-six names and one unknown.*
2 *The Palestine Post of 21st April 1948 quoted a Hadassah staff physician as saying how helpful and considerate British Army assistance was when it arrived.*

Mount Scopus very difficult, despite the British presence, and a way had to be found to get the seven hundred people down from Hadassah Hospital and the University. Eli Davis, the Deputy Medical Director, asked Jack Churchill for help. Davis's account of his meeting is told in Chapter 15 of Marlin Levin's book, *Balm in Gilead - The Story of Hadassah* as follows:-

> "Major Churchill told me there was a slight chance of getting through to Mount Scopus, because the Arabs saw the British meant business. He agreed to make the trip up to Scopus and invited me along. The Major took a Jeep and his driver. I sat, while he stood in the Jeep twirling his stick. He looked as though he were on parade in London. Nothing happened as we went through Sheikh Jarrah. On Scopus we were embraced. We had shown it was possible to get through"

Subsequently, four convoys brought down two hundred patients, a hundred student nurses and three hundred staff members, as well as 600 tons of equipment and supplies. Not a shot was fired. The last convoy, on 5th May, was the biggest because, Davis later claimed, Jack could provide no more help. He had already; he said, exceeded his orders and was in trouble with his superiors.

Finally, a monumental row developed between the British and the Jews over the Hadassah Convoy massacre. Jack Churchill claims that it was his action alone that, in the end, got the Army Command off the hook over what had been, essentially, an Arab/Jewish confrontation. The letter from General Gordon MacMillan, General Officer Commanding British Troops in Palestine, to Dr. J.L. Magnes, President of the Hebrew University, in reply to the Doctor's letters querying the British Army's lack of action during the ambush (reproduced in Appendix A, from the *Palestine Post* of 29th April 1948) would seem to justify Jack's claim to the hilt.

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In 1979, Israel sent a television team to Jack's house in Woking, in Surrey to interview him on the 1948 Hadassah Massacre - an event, especially with the part Jack played in it, still well remembered in Israel. Jack's bold and decisive action on that day in Jerusalem has, however, never been materially recognized by his own country.

In an attempt to be objective over the Army's apparent indecision on 13th April 1948 at Sheikh Jarrah, the allegory occurs to me of a policeman, on his beat, coming upon a street fight. It is his duty to take action to maintain law and order. If the officer is young, enthusiastic and bold, he will doubtless spring to separate the combatants; an older, experienced and more realistic man with an eye, perhaps, on retirement, may well prefer to stand back and pick up the pieces. Could Jack, in this parable, epitomize the former, the Army the latter?

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From Palestine, Jack, in 1953, was posted as an instructor to the School of Land/Air Warfare in Newcastle, north of Sydney in Australia. Here, as well as passing on his special brand of soldiering to Commonwealth soldiers, sailors and airmen, he took up, seriously, the art of surf-riding, designing his own boards and developing a form of hand paddle for getting his run going faster.When he returned to England in 1954, taking his surfing gear with him, he was appointed as a selector at the War Office Selection Board at Barton Stacey in Hampshire, through which all National Service applicants for commission in the Army had to pass.

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From here he planned and subsequently achieved the first-ever surfing run over about a mile and a half of the River Severn's formidable five feet high tidal bore. This achievement was reported in *The Times and Evening Standard of 22nd July 1955.* The report was replayed in the Australian Press a few days later, largely as a result of which his feat has been since emulated by some Australian beach surf lifeguards.

The economics of transporting his long(1) narrow board to the Severn from his home in Surrey, some hundred and fifty miles away, much exercised Jack's mind in the planning of the operation. It eventually boiled down to a choice between using Rosamund's "enormously extravagant 25 hp Wolseley" with the board strapped to the roof, or of constructing a trailer to tow behind his motor bike - which by this time was the very Vincent-HRD 'Black Widow' that had won, at record overall and lap speeds, the Senior Clubman's class in the 1952 Isle of Man TT races - as the plate on its tank proclaimed.

Jack finally decided that the latter method would be the thriftier and built himself a tilting trailer for the purpose, which worked well enough. In the event, he was stopped by a policeman in Faringdon on his return journey and charged with towing behind a solo motor-cycle. The subsequent fine was, however, only £2 - "much cheaper", Jack gleefully announced, "than using the 25 hp Wolseley car!"

One of Jack's hobbies - over many years, in fact - was the collection, embellishment and use of radio-controlled scale-model ships - mostly warships - which he turned over from time to time, to his advantage, by sales at Christie's. The technical standards he had achieved in fitting out and operating these beautiful craft was truly quite remarkable, especially in one who had never been trained in any of the skills required.

In later years Jack's real love, however, lay in full-size steamboats, of which he had owned a bewildering variety and, in which field, he was known as an expert. It was, indeed, a truly fine sight on a summer's day to see an elegant and immaculate steam launch gliding through the waters of the Thames from Richmond to Oxford, its funnel trailing a wisp of smoke, white against the green of the trees of the far bank, with Jack, his steamboat cap square on his head, carrying out the duties of engineer and stoker,

1. 16-foot - which was very long for those days.

while Rosamund at the helm "issues numerous orders," claimed Jack, "blowing the whistle at boats that do not obey the rule of the road and keep to the right."

In 1959, after exactly a third of a century of, on the whole, friendly association with the Army, Jack retired. For the next thirteen years he worked as a 'Retired Officer' (RO), employed as a Civil Servant by the Ministry of Defence as staff officer to the Cadet Force units in London District. This suited him down to the ground, since the job gave him, firstly, an office in the Horse Guards in Whitehall, from which he could look down, with the intense pleasure he had always gained from military ceremonial parades, onto the Household Cavalry mounting guard in the courtyard below, and, secondly, the opportunity of visiting (on a fine day on his latest motor-bike, perhaps), in their camps, the widespread cadet units in which he took such keen interest.

Jack remained the romantic yet realistic individualist, applying to life in general - and war in particular - his inbuilt characteristic of ‘unlimited boldness', together with a perpetual zest for living. His unique 'professional amateur’ style stemmed originally, I believe, from the 'playing fields' attitude he had eagerly absorbed both at school and, with his two splendid brothers, at home. We could do with more like Jack Churchill - my friend - but, perhaps, not too many more!

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Jack Churchill died peacefully, at St Stephens Hospital, Chertsey on 8th March 1996

APPENDIX

Extract from: *Palestine Post* of 29 April 1948.The italics are the author's

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'The full text has now been published of the correspondence between *Dr J. L. Magnes, President of the Hebrew University and Chairman of the Hadassah Council in Palestine, and General MacMillan, the GOC* concerning the killing of 76 Jews in the Hadassah convoy trapped in Sheikh Jarrah for about seven hours on 13 April. *It is stated in a letter dated 23 April, ten days after the event, that an attempt was made to bring help within an hour and a half of the attack, when a courageous officer of the Highland Infantry backed a lone vehicle up to the convoys and offered to rescue as many as he could take* and that this "offer was not accepted". There appear to be no survivors among those to whom he spoke, as nobody was up to now aware that this effort had been made.

The GOC adds that he resented the suggestion that nothing had been done until late afternoon, as he himself had passed the scene of the attack at 9.45 and had judged the situation to be clearing up. He had been surprised to find heavy firing still in progress at 4.30, when he returned by the same route.

There is also a protest by the Arab Higher Committee that the Army should have intervened to rescue the survivors.

The correspondence, as issued by the Public Information Office on Tuesday, follows:

Dr J.L. Magnes to **Brigadier C.F. Jones [OBE, MC Commander, 2nd Infantry Brigade]:**

I am sending you herewith a copy of some notes prepared by Dr J.M. Bromberg, one of the trusted physicians of the Hadassah Hospital, concerning what took place in the ambulance in which Dr Yassky, the Director of the Hospital, was killed. (These were published in *The Palestine Post* on 21 April.)

You will see that Dr Yassky received his fatal wound at 2.30pm.

I telephoned you at 1.45 that day asking if it was not possible to send vehicles to rescue those who had been trapped since 9.45 that morning. You said that that was what you were trying to do, but the difficulty was that a major battle was going on.

I have tried to explain to myself and to others why this should have prevented the rescue of those valuable lives whose passing we are now mourning. I confess, I am not able to explain it. This is the reason why I am writing you this letter and *why I am sending copies to the High Commissioner, The GOC* [General MacMillan] and the Chief of Staff.

I am not without a sense of guilt myself. Perhaps had I made my appeal to you stronger at 1.45, my friend and fellow-worker, Dr Yassky, would not have been killed at 2.30, and the other teachers and laboratory workers of the University might have had their lives spared.

As you know, I have been very grateful for the efforts you have made during the past several weeks to keep the road to the Hospital open and comparatively secure. I cannot, however, rid myself of the fateful question: Why was it not possible to rescue men and women bent on errands ofmercy and of science between the hours of 9.45 in the morning and the hours of the late afternoon?

15 April 1948

General MacMillan to Dr Magnes

Thank you for your further letter of 18 April regarding the events of 13 April at Sheikh Jarrah.

The answer to your question is simple. When the firing at the immobilized Jewish vehicles became heavy *the second-in-command of the HLI succeeded in himself backing a British armoured vehicle up to the stranded Jewish vehicles. At considerable personal risk he got out and attempted to persuade the Jews to get out of their own vehicle and get into the British one. This they refused to do. They insisted on remaining in their own vehicles. The Officer could not remain there indefinitely under fire. Persuasion having failed there was no other course open to him than to come away again. This occurred at 11.15 am.*

I hope you will agree, therefore, *that a very definite and indeed gallant effort was made to rescue these unfortunate persons.* The fact that the effort failed was wholly caused by their refusal to be evacuated from their own vehicles.

My impression is that in the persistent propaganda against the British troops *this brave action on the part of my officer and the suicidal attitude of the occupants of the Jewish vehicles have been deliberately ignored* and the sooner it is made public the better.

23 April 1948

Letters omitted: General MacMillan to Dr Magnes of 15 April 1948 and Dr Magnes to General MacMillan of 18 April 1948.

INDEX