

## *The Crash of Flight 3804*

*A Lost Spy, a Daughter's Quest and the Deadly Politics of the Great Game  
for Oil*

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### **Robin Ramsay**

The author's father died in a plane crash – flight 3804 – in 1947 in Ethiopia. He was working for the Central Intelligence Group – which was about to be renamed the CIA – and was America's leading undercover officer in the Middle East. The author, a journalist, describes decades of work researching her father's activities, trying to get access to official files to work out what happened to that flight and what her father had been doing. En route she learns about the reality of the oil and geopolitics business in the area. She therefore gives us two interwoven journeys: one through letters, libraries, memoirs, bureaucracies, Freedom of Information requests (and denials, appeals and courts); and the other is through the history of oil in the region – with *lots* about the oil pipelines – and thus the history of US involvement.

On pages 257/8 she lists all the wars in the region since the end of WW2 and their estimated casualties. Oddly, she doesn't total them. So I did. I make it 2,702,000, and that's a *minimum* figure. And oil was at the heart of all of it – including the foundation of Israel – and the USA was responsible for much of the carnage.

My hard copy of this got lost en route and the publisher emailed a digital version to read. As this is not a subject about which I have much knowledge – to do this book any kind of serious critical justice I would need to be Robert Fisk – here are some of the sections I thought worthy of copy/paste as I read it. I hope it conveys some sense of what a significant piece of work this is.

'In 1949, the CIA overthrew then Syrian president Shukri al-Quwatli in its first-ever coup d'état and replaced him with a police chief who promptly approved the pipeline route across Syrian territory. The stakes were huge: guaranteed American transportation of Saudi oil to markets in Europe—at the expense of the Soviets.' p. 34

'It would take me decades to understand how conflicts in Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and Syria fit into the Great Game for Oil, a deadly game that employed colonial divide-and-rule tactics to gain control over a region, pitting Arabs against Jews, Shiites against Sunnis, and Christians against Muslims.' p. 38

'Davidson was simply mirroring the views of Halliburton's CEO, who in 1998 was quietly courting the Taliban in his own search for secure pipeline routes. A man known for his steely resolve, he was determined to beat out any and all competition that thwarted Halliburton's goal of becoming a big winner in the Great Game for Oil. His name was Dick Cheney. In 2000 he was chosen by the Republican soon-to-be president candidate, George W. Bush, as his running mate. Together, the two oilmen would take the Great Game and pipeline politics to a new and dangerous level, one that would forever change the course of American foreign policy in Central Asia and the Middle East and, ironically, slowly erode America's standing in the world as a great world power.' p. 62

'In other words, Cohn, by studying Cheney, had stumbled on a vast network of his oil interests that extended from the Balkans to the Middle East to the Caspian Sea. (Today, Halliburton is active in seventy countries, describing itself as "one of the world's largest providers of products and services to the energy industry.") When viewed in the context of the US/NATO wars in Iraq and Kuwait (The Gulf War: 1990-1991), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001-present), and Iraq (2003-2011), one could even conclude that the grand vision of Cheney and others in the oil sector was the equivalent to creating a new American empire.' p. 68

'Once in office, Bush [Junior] appointed so many oil executives to his cabinet that the *Oil and Gas Journal* gushed, "From industry's perspective, the casting of the lead roles couldn't be better.'" p. 69

'Even members of my own family could not understand my anguished outbursts when I watched disinformation being peddled as news on TV. When it came to comprehending the real motives for invading Afghanistan, most Americans were still experiencing the kind of "psychic numbness" that physician and antinuclear activist Helen Caldicott blamed for public inaction on nuclear proliferation and that others have blamed for inaction on climate change.' p. 75

'In 1989, a small group of neoconservatives—both Democrats and Republicans—who had been influential strategists in the Defense Department during the Ford, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush administration came together to produce the *Defense Planning Guidance* report, which advocated US military dominance around the world. Key among the strategists was Dick Cheney (who would become George W. Bush's secretary of defense), Colin Powell (who would become Bush's secretary of state), and Paul Wolfowitz (who would become Bush's deputy secretary of defense). Their plan called for the United States to grow in military superiority and prevent new rivals from rising up as challengers, particularly in the Middle East, where their goal was to preserve US access to the region's oil.' p. 77

'The "Kurdish war" drained Iraq's treasury and hampered the country's development as it strove to become a secular social-democratic mecca in the Middle East.' p. 86

'What I did *not* know was that this disputed oil deposit in Iraqi Kurdistan once fed oil to Haifa, Israel, through the Kirkuk-Haifa pipeline—a fact I would discover only when I began to burrow into the causes of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. It was then that I learned that energy-starved Israel had sought the pipeline's reopening for years, but the Baathist regime had remained steadfastly opposed. Only regime change in Iraq would change that equation, or so the planners of the 2003 Iraq War believed.' p. 86

'The early days of the war in Afghanistan had opened the door to those who wanted to revive the pipeline route through Afghanistan. Wrote Kleveman in his 2003 book, *The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia*, "The ties between politics and the petroleum business have become much easier to recognize. President Bush's special envoy to Afghanistan and member of the National Security Council, Zalmay Khalilzad, had previously worked for Unocal on an elaborate risk analysis for the Afghan pipeline.'" p. 88

'Was the Syrian civil war a pipeline war? I believe it was. Nafeez Ahmed is more cautious in his assessment: "Pipeline geopolitics is . . . only a subset

of wider competition to dominate global energy markets," he wrote in his 2018 *State Propaganda* report. "This was not about one specific project. It was about Syria's unique geographical location, offering a range of potential routes to transport Mediterranean oil and gas to Europe. Whoever Syria decided to align with would determine the future energy map of the region.'" p. 128

'Big-power efforts to undermine the Syrian regime at the very time that two competing pipeline projects were being considered underlay much of the political maneuvering in the region. The escalating war in 2015 made all pipeline schemes involving Syria unfeasible. But once the fighting stops, the covert pipeline wars between the West (seeking to bypass Russia) and Russia (seeking to consolidate its hold over pipeline routes to Europe) will no doubt resume.' p. 128

'In 1923, the warring parties (excluding the United States) signed a peace treaty, the Treaty of Lausanne, that settled Turkey's borders. At the Turks' insistence, no mention was made of Armenia. The United States signed a similar commercial treaty with Turkey that guaranteed an open-door policy for US businesses, especially the oil business. A Turkish-Armenian attorney named Vahan Cardashian expressed his indignation, noting that "the Department of State became a concession-hunting agency for the Standard Oil Company."

'E. H. Bierstadt, author of *The Great Betrayal*, blasted High Commissioner Bristol and the State Department as tools of economic imperialism. The treaty, he said, "was signed in oil, and sealed with the blood of the . . . Armenians who were sacrificed to make the signings possible."

Peter Balakian, a major chronicler of the Armenian genocide, notes in his book *The Burning Tigris* that Mark Bristol and Charles Evan Hughes "agreed that Turkey's treatment of its minorities was now less important than American business interests and the vast real estate holdings of the American missionaries.'" p. 162

'God forbid if the American people came to realize that World War I was fought, in large part, not to make the world safe for democracy but to help robber barons reap enormous profits and establish spheres of influence in resource-rich parts of the world, including the Middle East.' p. 197

The book concludes with her and members of her family meeting senior CIA people ((including the DCIA) as her long campaign to have her father recognised as one of the CIA's first dead heroes is acknowledged by the Agency. In the CIA's HQ she sees a sign hanging on the wall: it proclaims 'We are the Nation's first line of defense. We accomplish what others cannot accomplish and we go where others cannot go.' By this time her view of American foreign policy is something like John Pilger's and she knows that this sign is just horseshit. But she makes no comment in the book or at the time and the ceremony to honour her father proceeds.

Later she is emailing with a senior CIA officer, the assistant director of the CIA's Near East Mission, David Marlowe. He tells her:

*'Your dad's role was unique, and he is among the very first of our predecessors. As we introduce new officers to our work in the Middle East, he is among the first people they hear about. And what they hear is the nature of the region in which we operate, and the nature of the officers who leave a timeless stamp.'*

'Words like these, coming from the highest levels of the CIA, made me think that my quest had been worthwhile. They prompted me to ponder: Are we on the cusp of something new? Or is it the same old story: protecting the oil—and the oil and air routes—at all costs?

The day after I received Marlowe's statement, a new report came across my email transom that reminded me of some harsh realities in today's Middle East. It was the latest Costs of War report from Brown University—*The CIA's Army: A Threat to Human Rights and an Obstacle to Peace in Afghanistan*. It stated, "the CIA is still running local militias in operations against the Taliban and other Islamist militants. Throughout, the militias reportedly have committed serious human rights abuses, including numerous extrajudicial killings of civilians. CIA sponsorship ensures that their operations are clouded in secrecy. There is virtually no public oversight of their activities or accountability for grave human rights abuses.

This is not what my father would have wanted.'