

RUSSIA'S UNKNOWN "BURMA ROAD":

By Baby Car Through The Wild Mountains Of Irak And Iran

(Specially written for "The Listener" by
MARJORIE RICHARDS.)



TRIBESMEN of the Rowanduz: Knives
don't make echoes

WITH the Finns sitting on the Murmansk Railway, ice already beginning to coat the White Sea approaches to Archangel, and some hundreds of the six thousand miles of Trans-Siberian line within range of Japanese guns, Russia's supply line (we think) is hanging on a thread—the single railway track that perilously twists and tunnels over two eight thousand foot ranges and across Iran's sun-smitten and snow-flecked plateau from the Persian Gulf down again to the Caspian's tropical fringe. That two other supply routes run through Iran very few people indeed know.

One is in her far east—a passable desert, rather than a road, that climbs and undulates hundreds of arid Beluchi miles till at Meshed it meets Russian lorries trundling the Golden road to Samarkand and the Turcoman and Turksib (Turkistan-Siberian) railways. The other is in the far west—the shortest possible link between British and Russian territory, a mere three hundred or so miles from Irak to the Trans-Caucasus. But it runs through mountains standing on end like bristles on a brush. And it was so recently made that only four years ago my husband and I on our way home overland to New Zealand could not for sure discover until our baby Ford reached Mosul whether such a route was actually open to us.

Single-Handed Feat

The Irak part of this road, the new part, the part that is actually a road, is locally called the Rowanduz (Row-andooze) from the more spectacular of the two stupendous gorges through which it scales the mountains. But I have seen it written The Hamilton Road, after A. M. Hamilton, the New Zealand engineer who built it. "Single-handed" is almost the word to use. For Mr. Hamilton, on an assignment that might have daunted the P.W.D.'s trained army of expert workmen and modern mechanical equipment, was the sole European on the job, and all the skill that his motley gangs of Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, Turks, Persians, Georgians and what-not had



"Mountains standing on end like bristles on a brush": Rowanduz from the air

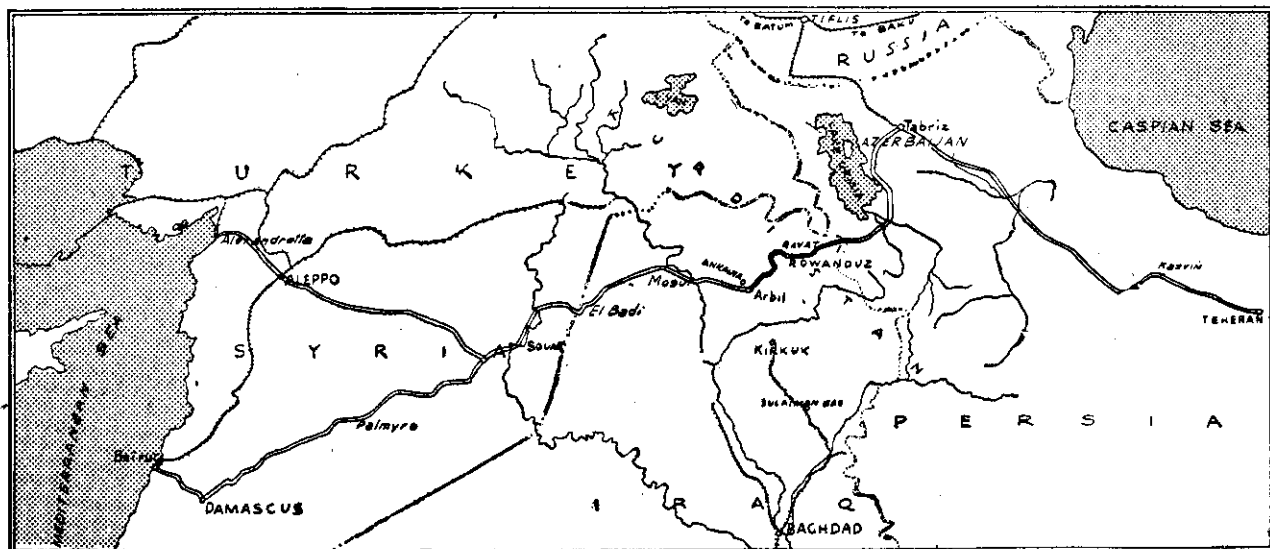
in handling—and mending—what tools they had they learned from him as they went along. For five years, in the blazing heat of summer and icy blasts of winter, with Arabs killing Kurds and Kurds killing Arabs all round, and with the mountain peoples naturally bitter against this truck-carrying, troop-carrying spear of intervention thrust into their semi-independence and spare-time trade of robbery and their recreation of feud, he was surveyor, leader, father, mechanic, and at times politician; supervising operations; controlling, paying, feeding, his men; finding supplies; reconnoitring the gloomy depths for possible lines of passage; mending breakages; designing his bridges as he went.

And somehow too he found occasional leisure for such diversions as penetrating the hidden intricacies of the Blood Feud of Rowanduz and the career of Hamada Chin, the Spilik Pass brigand, going hunting (and finding!) the Treasure Vault of the Ancient Kings in the tops of the mountains, and taking first-rate photographs; which, photos and tales, you will find in his fascinatingly-written *Road Through Kurdistan*.

New Road: Ancient Route

I have called the Rowanduz a new road. So it was, as a road, for our New Zealand-bound baby, was the first private car ever through. (We doubt if many have followed since.) But as the general direction of treks from the Plains of Shinar to the Persian Plateau, and vice versa, it is prehistoric. Each spring the Irak Kurds have left their womenfolk to hoe and weave, and have climbed by devious goat-tracks edging the scarps of the canyons to the upland meadows of Iran. Arbela, its point of departure, was already ancient, when in decisive battle there Greek Alexander wrenched the Empire of the East from Persian Darius. In Genesis it is named as one of the four cities of Assur, the kingdom that was before even Babylon

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SKETCH MAP, showing "The Hamilton" (Rowanduz) Road; marked in black, linking Irak with Tabriz and the railway to Russia