The Strange Erasure of Arab Town
By Alfred Friendly
Washington Post Foreign Service

TEL AVIV—Inimawas, an Arab village of about 2500 inhabitants in what was 1961 Jordan-occupied Palestine, was totally destroyed by the Israeli army in the six-day war, reduced to a rubble of mud bricks and cement. No wall stands higher than two or three feet. The destruction extends over an area equal to half a dozen city blocks. Stories of what brought about the “inimawas affair” have been circulating by word of mouth ever since, and the argument is likely to continue for a long time because the truth is far from evident.

The question is why it was destroyed —whether wantonly, as pro-Arab sources allege, or necessarily, as a consequence of the fierce fighting there, as Israeli military sources assert. Why it was destroyed is interesting, except for the town of Qalqilya, also in the Israeli-Jordan border, whose partial destruction was almost certainly the result of a heavy battle, Inimawas is the only other settlement to have been even seriously damaged in the war, much less destroyed.

That remarkable aspect of the war is worth dwelling on just to put the Inimawas affair into perspective. No modern war fought so furiously by the armed forces was so astonishingly sparing of civilian casualties or was followed by such an absence of brutality to the vanquished population.

Although roads are littered with the burned-out hulks of tanks and armored vehicles, it is difficult to find any damage in the cities and villages. Hebron, Bethlehem and Jenin are untouched; there are only scratches in Nablus; in Gaza City the radar station is destroyed and almost nothing else.

No Israeli soldier seems to have set foot inside any West Bank refugee camp. Lootting was minimal and reportedly nonexistent. In dozens of trips to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, neither an Israeli nor any reporter of my own has heard a specific incident of brutality alleged by Arabs.

The essence of the matter is perhaps best illuminated by an account of Sen. Albert Gore (D-Tenn.), who visited Jordan and spoke with top officials. He remarked to a cabinet minister of the absence of any assertions by the Arabs ofInstances of brutality or atrocities.

“Oh, not so,” the minister replied. “Only today, a lady from East Jerusalem came to my office and related that after the fighting ended there, an Israeli soldier stalled up to her and whispered: ‘How about coming with me, and I’ll show you the sights of Tel Aviv?’”

Why, Then, Inimawas?
WHY THEN, the leveling of Inimawas?
As the crew flies and as the old road once ran, Inimawas lies about halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. It was the main settlement of the so-called Latrun Salient, a ballooning little bulge in the border which Jordanian troops held at the time of the armistice ending the 1948 war of independence.

For several miles along the border and around the salient, the armistice agreements decreed a demilitarized zone, which soon lapsed into a no-man’s-land where the fields were left empty and uncultivated.

On one of the hills a few hundred yards from the settlement stands a Trappist monastery, for Inimawas is deemed to be ancient Emmaus, where, legend has it, Jesus resurrected the dead. Later the legendary site had Himselj to itself two of the Apostles three days after the Crucifixion.

But during the fighting, they killed beside the old and direct road from Tel Aviv and Ramla to Jerusalem, and also swat the road to the important West Bank city of Ramallah, north of Jerusalem.

Accordingly, when the war with Jordan began about noon on Monday, June 5, an Israeli armored force pushed quickly into the Latrun Salient and passed through Inimawas, intent on following a Jordanian tank force rapidly retreating up the Ramallah road. There was a minimum of fighting in the village that day.

But by nightfall, the Israelis, by then at or close to Ramallah, discovered what they had not known earlier: the Egyptian commando battalion that had been flown to Jordan a few days before had been dropped in Inimawas. Its mission was to raid Israel’s main civilian airfield, Lydda, a few miles distant, and other military airfields in the area.

With a more immediate opportunity in front of them, the commandos were told that the armored force had passed and they fell upon the supplies convoys following behind. In the process, they killed about 20 Israelis and blocked the flow of supplies.

The Israelis responded by sending in tanks to clean out the Egyptian unit. A sharp night action ensued, beginning about 2 a.m. Tuesday. There were no known civilian casualties. By that time, the 2000 inhabitants of the village abandoned it, most fleeing to Ramallah and some taking refuge in the monastery.

Differing Accounts
SO MUCH IS AGREED upon. But from that point on, the accounts differ. The Israeli military version is as follows:

The action lasted 24 hours, with tanks blasting out the dug-in commandos. A few were on top of the hills above one side of the village, but most were in the settlement. By the time the fighting was over, the place was a ruin with no house left fit for habitation.

Accordingly, some days later, the Israelis are saying that during the week and nights, authorities into the ruins, I can testify to at least one spot where something dead still remained.

The version of the Trappist fathers at the monastery is very different. The report is given by Father Reiml (he hails from Reims in France). During the week and nights, the monks locked themselves into the ruins, I can testify to at least one spot where something dead still remained.

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