



Source: Jonathan Freedland, 'The six-day war is not over. Today it brings the spectre of al-Qaida in Gaza', The Guardian online, 23/05/07.

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In 1953 Major Ariel Sharon led a reprisal attack against the town of Qibya on the West Bank territory protected by Jordan. Sharon was the commander of Unit 101, a clandestine gang embedded within the ranks of the Israeli paratroopers. The people of Qibya had been chosen by Israel to suffer for the losses inflicted on the Jews by the fedayeen raids, sponsored by Egypt, in which hundreds of settler citizens of the nascent Zionist state had lost their lives at the hands of angry, displaced fighters who vowed to sacrifice their lives for the future of their children.

It was the year of my birth. In the month of October my mother had grown heavy enough for a woman of her tiny stature and was ready to rid her belly of me in the local hospital only weeks later. Neither she nor any of my family would have known of the goings-on in Qibya for it was a long way from the small town in the mid-west of New South Wales where my parents lived. Sheep and wheat country. Yes, my parents had known war but mostly from a distance, through stories and newsreels.

Not far from our house was an abandoned prisoner of war camp. Later, when I was six or seven years old, my brother and cousins and I would ride our bikes up there and scramble around the rocks, building forts and playing wars with slingshots made from old bicycle inner tubes. During the real war, the Second World War, the camp had been used to incarcerate Japanese and Italian prisoners. But by 1953 the war seemed long gone, even the memories of the day the Japanese broke out of the camp and threw themselves under trains had faded to the point of insignificance in the day-to-day lives of people like my parents. Qibya never rated a mention because no one knew anything about what happened there that night in October 1953 and even if they did I doubt many of them would have cared much for the troubles between Arabs and Jews. My dad would have been more concerned with his racehorses and my mother just wanted an end to the

burden of pregnancy. People in our town had enough to worry about without thinking about all that. We had troops in Korea at the time and I suppose that rated a mention in conversation at the local barber shop but only if someone from the town was in Korea or knew someone who was. Geopolitics could never compete with gossip in our town. Besides, our war was over and we'd won. It was time to get on with living and people were busy building houses, buying cars and white goods, listening to Frank Sinatra and Elvis. Life was different, better than it had been before. All shiny and new.

Sharon and his men raided the town on an autumn evening in 1953. It was the end of the fig harvest and the beginning of the olive season. The rainy time of year. Apparently, Sharon had a reputation at that time for being a ruthless leader and Qibya consolidated his stature as an Israeli warrior. The raid was well organised and brutal. People of the town were kept in their houses overnight by the strategic use of gun fire. Those who ventured out of doors were cut down under strict 'shoot to kill' orders. So it is told by some commentators. Those who remained indoors had their houses demolished by Sharon's engineers and died within. Some say 60 people died, some say a lot more. Israel tried to cover it up by blaming settlers for the violence but eventually it was revealed as an Israeli Defence Force action under the command of Sharon. Unit 101. The Lion. The Sleeping Lion, these days. He fell into a coma. He still lives, so they say.

I doubt many people in Australia would care much about Sharon and his sleeping. I doubt many would know anything about Qibya or Unit 101. Or the Balfour Declaration. We have other things to worry about now. The traffic on the bridge. The renovations. Tax cuts. *Big Brother*.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Boris Kelly.*