Within four days after the British mandate had ended in Palestine, and just when it seemed that the forces of Haganah were winning command of Jerusalem, the highly trained troops of King Abdullah Ibn Hussein's Arab Legion swarmed down from the Mount of Olives and into the city. With them during the battle was LIFE Photographer John Phillips, who took these pictures.

From the time the Arab Legion launched its attack the Old City was a blackened, twisted nightmare for both Jew and Arab. By day shells whistled into the encircled Jewish quarter, which 400 Jews were defending. By night, under the hazy light of a full moon, red tracer bullets arched across the sky. Occasionally a woman's scream cut through the clutter of gunfire or the high, keening outcries of the defenders sounded above the attackers' artillery. In the intermittent silence the tread of someone walking down an alleyway frayed the nerves.