

CHAPTER 11 MESOPOTAMIA IN 1916

Those battalions of The Queen's Own who spent 1916 in the East found it an uneventful year, apart from the tenacious but ill-fated defence of Kut al Amara, in which B and D Companies of the 2nd Battalion shared. These had left Nasiriya on November 9th under the command of Major Nelson, with whom were Captains Dinwiddy and Clarke, 2nd Lieut. Mills, two attached officers, Lieuts. Burns (5th Buffs) and Gregory (4th Devons), C.S.M.'s Crisford and Fletcher, and 322 rank and file. Travelling in native sailing boats they reached Qurna on the 11th, left for Kut two days later on a river steamer, and after a crowded and uncomfortable journey, delayed by running aground several times, reached Kut on the 17th. A week later orders were received to move up to Lajj to reinforce the Sixth Division, which was then actually attacking the Turkish position covering Baghdad.

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D Company left that evening by steamer, B marching next morning along with the 14th Hussars. It was a trying march, the guides missed the way, the ground was slippery from heavy rain, and the camels and undersized mules of the transport gave much trouble. However, moving partly by land and partly by steamer the two companies reached Aziziya on the 28th, to find there the Sixth Division, which had won a Pyrrhic victory at Ctesiphon on the 22nd but had then been compelled to retire downstream by the arrival of large Turkish reinforcements. The wing was attached to Sir Charles Melliss's 30th Brigade (2/7th Gurkhas and 24th and 76th Punjabis) in which there was no British battalion.

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On November 30th, the Sixth Division resumed its rearward move, the 30th Brigade pushing on ahead

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because news had been received that the communications had been cut below Kut by Arabs. After covering twenty miles it encamped that night at Shadaif, but before the march could be resumed next morning two British officers of the 7th Cavalry came in with the urgent message from General Townshend that he had been overtaken by the Turks and must fight, so General Melliss must return to his help. At 6.10 a.m., therefore, the 30th Brigade started on its ten-mile march back to Umm al Tubal, arriving about 9 a.m., Just as a well executed counter stroke had foiled an enveloping movement by the Turks and thrown them back in disorder. The Sixth Division thereupon resumed its retreat with the 30th Brigade as rearguard, fighting a running action with Arab cavalry, who hovered continually on the flanks. General Townshend was determined to profit by the check he had inflicted on his pursuers to get his troops well away from the Turkish main body, and the retreat was continued till Shadie, thirty-six miles from Umm al Tubal, was reached just before midnight, the 30th Brigade having had in addition their march back from Shadaif. The men were utterly exhausted, when they halted they lay down in column and slept as they were, the R.W.K. being lucky in that they were about the only people to get any food, as they happened to find part of their transport. But the forced march had achieved its object, the pursuers had been shaken off: the next day's move brought the retreating troops without molestation to Shumran, only a few miles up-stream of Kut, and on December 3rd the R.W.K. marched into Kut, pitched their camp on the East of the town and promptly set to work on the defences.

December 1915
2nd Battalion

December 1st

December 2nd

The town of Kut stands at the end of a horse-shoe bend in the Tigris, just at the

See sketch 15

confluence of that river and the Shatt al Hai. The area of the entrenched camp which the Sixth Division established was about two miles in depth and a mile across at the inland end.

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Scarcely any defensive works had as yet been erected; there was only a line of block-houses about 2,000 yards North of the town, and if a successful stand were to be made much more extensive and elaborate defences would be needed. The troops had therefore to set about digging trenches, putting up wire and improving the communications between the front line and positions further to the rear. The 30th Brigade was assigned to the N.W. sector of the defences, being relieved at regular intervals by the 16th Brigade and drawn back to the second line of defence to act as General Reserve.

The fatigues of the march back to Kut were still fresh when the Turks came up and invested the town. On the right bank of the Tigris the garrison had two posts, one at the so-called Woolpress village opposite the town above the junction with the Hai, the other a bridgehead two miles lower down. This last post was still very inadequately consolidated, when, on December 9th the Turks attacked in force and drove in the company of the 67th Punjabis which was holding it. D Company 2nd R.W.K., under Captain Clarke, was sent up from reserve, but it was impossible to recover the bridgehead, and in the end the bridge had to be demolished, an operation gallantly carried out by two young officers and a party of Gurkhas and Sappers and Miners. Still the loss of this connection with the right bank was to be a real disadvantage to the defence.

For the first two months of the siege the Turks pressed extremely hard on the garrison, hoping to capture the town by force before the relieving column, already gathering lower down the river, could come into action. The British units of the garrison had more than their share of the work, for the Indian battalions had lost heavily in British officers, and mainly in consequence - by General Townshend's own admission—they were decidedly shaken and not altogether to be relied on. The wing of the R.W.K. and a company of the 1/4th

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Hampshires, belonging to the original Kut garrison, formed a composite battalion under Major Nelson, and had a most strenuous and active time. The Turks' advanced trenches were close up, within 50 yards in places, and, despite all the garrison could do to stop them, they gradually worked up nearer till by January 20th they were only 25 yards away. Their snipers were very busy, and at night heavy rifle and machine-gun fire was often maintained. The Turks tried assault after assault, but these were mainly directed against the Fort at the N.E. end of the line, and the only occasion on which the R.W.K.'s section was threatened was on December 25th, when the attempt was met by so heavy and effective a fire that it was nipped in the bud.

When in second line there was much digging to be done, and supports were often required for the front line, so that these periods did not mean any real relief. The R.W.K. were in the front line from December 11th to 18th, from the 22nd to the 26th, from January 1st to 8th, and 15th to 21st. On this last date the river, which had been steadily rising for some days, broke through the bunds along the riverbank and flooded both the Turkish advanced trenches and the greater part of the British front line and immediate support trenches. The garrison had to retire across the open to the Middle

December
1915-
January 1916
2nd Battalion

December 1915
to
June 1916
2nd Battalion

Line, leaving a strong picquet in the only piece of the support trenches that had been kept out of water. In withdrawing the R.W.K. and Hants had about a dozen casualties from snipers, but they retaliated with good effect on the Turks, who were likewise flooded out of their trenches and compelled to expose themselves. After this a belt flooded ground intervened between the two sets of trenches, and instead of the Turks being almost within bombing range they were 500 yards away, except for a few advanced posts on some sandhills in the flooded area. From this time therefore the tactical situation

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and the character of the siege altered. All prospect of an attack in force was at an end and the fighting died down. There was much intermittent shelling and sniping to be endured, but the Turks had abandoned the effort to take Kut by storm and were relying on the slower but surer method of starvation, while concentrating all their forces to keep at bay the troops who were trying to work their way through to Townshend's relief.

It was a dreary and painful time for the garrison. The first reduction in rations had occurred as early as January 20th, when the tea ration was cut down by a half and the battery bullocks were first used for rations. Four days later the troops were put on half-rations of bread and meat, with only ½oz. of sugar and ⅓oz. of tea per diem. On January 29th horsemeat was first issued, and after that the quality and quantity of the rations suffered reduction after reduction. The officers' chargers went after General Aylmer's repulse at the Dujailah Redoubt (March 8th), when the last hope of co-operation with the relievers was given up, a fact announced by the sacrifice of the artillery horses. Till then the R.W.K. had been among the troops chosen to lead in any attempt of the besieged to break out; had the sortie proposed for March 8th been attempted 250 R.W.K. and 150 Gurkhas under Major Nelson would have had the honour of being the first to cross to the right bank to secure a bridge-head.

The last six weeks of the siege were the most trying. The men were getting weaker daily and were hardly capable of getting through the comparatively small amount of work to be done: even the cleaning of trenches had to be performed in short spells with many reliefs. Every possible expedient for eking out the scanty store of food was tried. Nearly everybody was affected by dysentery and the death rate among the wounded was very high. Meanwhile the relieving column was making effort after effort. But it had the

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Tigris to contend against as well as the stubborn resistance of the Turk playing the defensive game at which he has always shone, and the Tigris was an important factor in the failure to win through. At last on April 29th, after nearly five months, the end came and over 8,000 British and Indian officers and men surrendered to the Turks. Among them were some 300 of The Queen's Own. The detachment's losses had been 22 killed or died of wounds, one died of disease, and 54 . wounded.

Many of the wounded and a certain number of sick had the good fortune to be among those exchanged against Turkish prisoners in British hands. They thus escaped the fate which overtook the majority of those who remained in Turkish hands and endured the horrors of the long march into captivity in Asia Minor. Weakened by the long and grim struggle against starvation, the prisoners were quite unfit for such exertions, even had

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April 1916
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March – April
1916
2nd Battalion

April 1916

their captors been as considerate as the Turks were callous, and their arrangements for feeding them as careful and well organized as they were careless and indifferent. Of the 226 of the 2nd R.W.K. who actually passed into captivity only 69 survived their ordeal: the long march from Rut to Asia Minor accounted for a large number, enfeebled and run down as they all were by the privations and strain of the long-drawn-out siege. Of those who survived the horrors of the march many more perished in the Turkish prison camps from the combined effects of scanty and indifferent food, brutal ill treatment and overwork, and scandalous neglect of ordinary decencies on the part of their captors. (1) There are few sadder incidents in the history of the British Army than the surrender of Kut and the fate of its defenders, but there

(1) Of the officers Lieut. Gregory alone succumbed to illness; Captain Clarke was one of a party who distinguished themselves by a daring and adventurous escape for which he was awarded the M.C.; they made their way to the coast after many perils and seized a boat in which they managed to make Cyprus.

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are few finer pages than those which tell of this stubborn and tenacious defence; and in this effort of endurance and determination the wing of the 2nd R.W.K. had earned no small credit for the Regiment, which may well be proud of General Melliss's report that the detachment had "upheld the finest traditions of the British Army for grit, cheerfulness and good work throughout the siege."

Meanwhile the headquarter wing of the 2nd Battalion had not been entirely without opportunities of distinction. A certain amount of activity on the part of the troops at Nasiriya was desirable to keep the local Arabs in check. The Turks were leaving no stone unturned to induce them to rise against the British, and information was received which pointed to the probability of a Turkish advance down the Euphrates to renew the effort which had been so completely foiled at Shaiba earlier in the year. Moreover, a move along the Shatt al Hai from Kut was another possibility to be reckoned with, and the 34th Indian Brigade, therefore, which had just arrived from India, was pushed up to reinforce the garrison of Nasiriya, and its arrival allowed a movable column to be organized in which the 2nd R.W.K. were included, On January 7th this force moved out to Butaniya, 12 miles or so North of Nasiriya.

On reaching Butaniya the battalion exchanged with the 5th Queen's from the 12th to the 34th Brigade, of which Brigadier-General Tidswell was in command, parting from its old brigadier, General Brooking, with real regret, a feeling which that officer admittedly shared. Its chance in the field was not slow to come. On January 14th a reconnaissance by the Divisional Commander in the direction of Suwaij was heavily attacked by Arabs directly it started to return to camp. The Queen's, who were experiencing their "baptism of fire," conducted the retirement admirably, but the Arabs were in great force and pressed them hard, so the

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R.W.K., with the 114th Mahrattas, had to be pushed out from Butaniya to cover the retirement. This they did with complete success and the Arabs, who had already been heavily punished, broke off the fight and dispersed. The battalion's casualties were trifling, one man being killed and three wounded, but unluckily Colonel Pedley himself was hit in the thigh and, though not dangerously wounded, had to be evacuated to India,

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on which Major Woulfe-Flanagan took over command.

For over a month the column continued in camp at Butaniya, the chief occupation of the troops being to find escorts for the convoys to and from Nasiriya. The weather turned extremely cold and to those who had endured the heat of July on the Euphrates it was indeed a change to have blizzards and snow, and such intense cold that cattle died from exposure and that one of the sentries had some kind of fit caused by the cold. Moreover, the distance from Nasiriya made it difficult to supply the troops with anything beyond the merest necessities and conditions were far from pleasant. By the beginning of February it was fairly evident that the purpose with which the force had been pushed out to Butaniya had been achieved. The tribesmen displayed no disposition to rise, the Intelligence reports showed that there was no Turkish force in the neighbourhood and that no Turkish advance down the Euphrates or along the Shatt al Hai was likely. It was accordingly decided to withdraw to Nasiriya, and on February 5th part of the column returned thither, to be followed two days later by the remainder of the force.

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Early on February 7th the night outposts which the battalion had been finding were relieved by the 114th Mahrattas and the battalion took post on the camping ground, shortly before the baggage started off at 9.30 escorted by The Queen's. Almost directly hostile Arabs began to appear and some pressed in upon the camp, but were easily held at bay, though the 114th Mahrattas on

February 7th

outpost were more closely pressed. At 10 o'clock the baggage had cleared some sand-hills about two miles from the camp which had been picketed by The Queen's and the cavalry, so the battalion began to fall back, acting as rear-guard to the force. At first the ground was flat and open, and as the enemy could get no cover they did not approach nearer than 1,500 yards and the sand-hills were reached with little trouble. Here a stand was made for over an hour, the enemy working wide round the flanks but not pressing, though one of the outpost companies of the 114th had lost heavily on withdrawing.

Feb 7th 1916

In the next stage of the movement, however, in which the battalion was again acting as rear-guard, trouble really began. To the West of the track along which the column was retiring were several villages, the inhabitants of which had been looking on, to all appearances as mere spectators. As the troops passed these Arabs suddenly produced weapons they had been concealing and opened fire, inflicting many casualties. The battalion and a squadron of cavalry were detailed to clear some of these villages and had some sharp fighting while engaged in this work, but kept the Arabs off until another line of sand-hills about two miles further South was reached. Here two Indian battalions, which had come out from Nasiriya, were waiting to take over the rear-guard, and the battalion passed through them and was proceeding to a new position some way further back when the Arabs pressed the new rear-guard so hard that one battalion became extremely unsteady and began to give way. The R.W.K. accordingly had to face about and return to the firing-line, while The Queen's left the baggage and took up a covering position in their place.

The Arabs, who were in great force, came on with much courage and resolution, making skilful use of the cover afforded by the watercourses and nullahs, with which the ground abounded. For a time the situation

was unpleasant: one of the Indian battalions was falling back in disorder, and, as the Brigadier reported, "only the accurate fire of the Mountain Battery (the 30th) and the steady courage of the R.W.K. took off the pressure." But the fighting was quite fierce and the situation critical; on the right it was hand to hand, and the Arabs were right in among the men who in some cases were walking away without making any effort either to fight or run. But The Queen's Own rose to the occasion; shooting steadily and coolly, they never let the Arabs close, and did much to relieve the pressure on the right. There were well under 200 rifles in the firing-line that day: out of the 10 officers and 265 other ranks present over 80 men were acting as signallers, machine gunners or stretcher bearers, and the remainder fired well over 120 rounds apiece. In the end the Arabs drew off about 4 p.m., discouraged by the rough handling they had received from the R.W.K. and the 114th, and seeing The Queen's appearing in strength on the right rear, and by 6 p.m. Nasiriya was reached. The total casualties came to nearly 400, so that the battalion with only thirty escaped lightly. These included Lieut. Haslam (attached from the 4th Battalion), C.S.M. Newbrook, one of the Nasiriya D.C.M.'s, and 6 men killed, and Lieut. Clough (1/4th R.W.K.) wounded. Captain Hardy received the M.C. for good work in this action and Ptes. Herbert and Vickers the D.C.M. for gallantry in rescuing wounded; indeed the battalion could congratulate itself on having been mainly instrumental in averting what had threatened to prove a very nasty business. The Arabs had shown themselves skilful and enterprising enemies, and it is only the vast scale of the war which reduces the "affair" of Butaniya to insignificance. There have been British campaigns in which it would have ranked as an important engagement and would have obtained far more recognition for the steadiness and gallantry of The Queen's Own.

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Two days later the battalion, 10 officers and 294 men, went out with a column under General Tidswell to chastise the Arabs for their treacherous attack of February 7th. Several of the villages mainly concerned were seized and destroyed, towers were blown up and huts burnt. Little opposition was offered, and though the Arabs followed the return to Nasiriya at a respectful distance they never pressed their attacks home; clearly they had learnt their lesson two days earlier. What few casualties occurred—the battalion had two men killed and three wounded—were mainly caused by long-range fire, and the whole operation was most successful. It was the last brush with an enemy which the 2nd was to have for many a long month. All through 1916 and well on into the next year it remained on the Euphrates, occasionally sending out detachments on columns employed in demonstrations or as escorts to Political Officers who made trips on steamers to various points along the river, but no fighting came its way.

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As the year wore on several drafts arrived to replenish its ranks. On March 30th Captain Wilberforce-Bell arrived with 6 subalterns and 131 men. In June Lieut. Balbernie rejoined with three other officers and 118 men from the Tigris line, the remnant of a detachment which had been attached to the 1st Connaught Rangers of the Lahore Division in the attempts to relieve Kut. These were all who were left out of nearly 500 officers and men who had taken part in the fighting of March, when the Rangers, then in large measure composed of this draft, had distinguished themselves in a sharp action at Abu Roman, capturing a Turkish position on some sand-hills, with 50 prisoners. They were again to the fore at Beit Aiessa on April 17th, when the Rangers, with the rest of the Ferozepore Brigade, held on to captured trenches in the face of massed counter-attacks and inflicted tremendous losses on the enemy. Later on the

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party were thinned by a cholera epidemic, and Then in May, when the Turks abandoned the Es Sinn position, the survivors helped to advance and occupy it. Though what they had accomplished stands to the credit of another regiment their own had good reason to be proud of them. Another detachment of nearly 80 joined in June, and five officers and 117 men appeared in November. As against this the sick-rate was high, and many officers and men were invalided; and though it proved possible to reorganize the battalion as one of four weak companies in June 1916 it was not until 1917 that its numbers were really brought up to strength. From May 1916 onwards it was in camp at Khamisiya, several miles S.E. of Nasiriya, with the mission of keeping the local Arabs in order, but here too it had an uneventful time under most uncomfortable and trying conditions. An observer who was on the Euphrates that summer (1) ^{has} written of embarking sick men of the regiment, of their exhausted, emaciated appearance, their soiled kit, shirts "white with the salt of perspiration, spine-pads and sun-guards half devoured by locusts," of "the pestilential heat," of "the air moist with the exudation of the drying swamp." At Khamisiya there was the additional discomfort of being without fresh water when the Euphrates fell and being consequently reduced to brackish well water. Certainly the battalion's lot was not one to be envied.

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To the 2/4th Battalion 1916 was a year of much hard work but no opportunities of distinction. The Fifty-Third Division was at first allotted to the "Force in Egypt," which was charged with maintaining order in the Nile Delta and with the operations against the Senussi, as distinct from the "Mediterranean Expeditionary Force," to which was allotted the defence of Egypt and the Canal against Turkish attacks. But by the time the Division had recovered from its losses at

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(1) Mr. E. Candler, "The Long Road to Baghdad," I. 282.

Gallipoli and had been re-equipped and re-organized the chief danger from the Senussi was over. Still there was some anxiety lest the trouble should spread, and in February the 160th Brigade was moved to the Fayum oasis to support a Yeomanry brigade which had already been sent there for patrol duties. In this spot the 2/4th spent nearly four months, at first having delightful weather, but as the year advanced so did the temperature, and before the battalion left Fayum for the Suez Canal zone at the end of May it had experienced 120° in the tents for several days on end. The battalion had seen no fighting while at Fayum, but its presence and the demonstration marches undertaken to the chief villages of the district had been effective in suppressing any disposition to revolt. In March Colonel Simpson's health compelled him to relinquish command again and to return to England; he was succeeded by Lieut.-Col. Norton, of the West India Regiment, who retained command till he also was invalided at the end of June; Lieut.-Col. Money, of the Shropshire Yeomanry, then obtained the command, taking over on July 27th. Large drafts, amounting to nearly 500 all told, had brought the battalion practically up to strength.

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The move to the Canal zone brought the battalion nearer to the theatre of active operations, though the Southern half of the Canal line was never the scene of fighting.

But the battalion was fully employed on keeping in repair a longish line of defence, so long that a continuous trench line could not be maintained and fortified posts were constructed at all the chief features of tactical importance. When the expected Turkish attack finally developed in August, to be decisively repulsed at Romani, the battalion was sent up North to Kantara, but too late for any fighting. Until September 12th it remained at Kantara, training but suffering a good deal from illness. A move to Moascar and two months' more training followed, and

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then the battalion returned to Kantara, drew equipment and camels, and on November 27th started off on a four-day march Eastward along the recently laid wire road. At Khirba a three weeks' halt was made, and then on December 20th the battalion moved up to Railhead, 40 miles further East, in readiness to support the attack on El Arish. However, the Turks did not think El Arish worth a fight and the 2/4th were retained at Railhead for local defence duties. Here the end of the year found it with A Company under Captain Hodgson, detached at Salmanca, and D (Captain Downes) at Mazar. If 1916 had brought it no fighting the year ended with the battalion close up to the front and with every prospect of a more active time near at hand.

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KUT EL AMARA.

= sand hills = British trenches
 = canals = communication lines

Scale (approx) YARDS 200 400 600



