

CHAPTER 21 PALESTINE

Nineteen hundred and seventeen had ended less happily on the Western front than it had at one time promised to do, to which disappointment the change of the plan for following up the Somme, the Russian revolution, the scanty success of General Nivelle's much vaunted short cut to victory, the bad weather of the autumn, the Caporetto collapse and the failure to develop to the full the initial success of Cambrai, had all in varying measure contributed. In the East, however, the year which had opened with one dramatic triumph, General Maude's skillfully accomplished recapture of Kut followed by his brilliantly successful advance on Baghdad, ended with the scarcely less striking and welcome overthrow of the Turkish defences between Beersheba and Gaza and the consequent delivery of Jerusalem.

1917
2nd & 2/4th
Battalions

If the 2nd Battalion in Mesopotamia did not have the good fortune to share in the year's dramatic triumphs, the representatives of The Queen's Own in Palestine had plenty of hard fighting and opportunities of earning distinction. The 2/4th had been heavily engaged, too, earlier in the year. Indeed it was in 1917 that it saw most of its fighting. January found it on the lines of communication in Sinai, but in February it moved up to El Arish, advancing at the end of month to Sheikh Zowaad, where it had the satisfaction of quitting the sand which it had been eating, drinking and breathing for months past and finding firm ground under its feet again. Here it was in reserve to the outposts which were covering the advance of the railway, and was mainly employed in finding working parties. In March it advanced to Rafa, where it was employed in the outpost line. Towards the end of the month it

2/4th Battalion

Jan – Feb

March

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crossed the old Turco-Egyptian frontier to take its part in the first of Sir Archibald Murray's attempts upon Gaza.

March 1917
2/4th
Battalion

This effort was really a *coup de main* rather than a deliberate formal attack. It was a repetition on a more ambitious scale of the sudden strokes which had succeeded so well at Maghdaba and Rafa, for while the infantry attacked from the South most of the mounted troops were employed in a wide sweep round the land-ward side of the town so as to attack it from the East and North-East and cut off the retreat of the garrison. The 2/4th had the distinction of being chosen for a special mission, being detailed along with the Gloucestershire Hussars and a section of 60-pounders, the whole under Colonel Money, to make a demonstration along the sea-coast on the extreme left of the attack to distract the Turks' attention from the other flank.

On March 24th, therefore, the battalion moved up to just beyond Khan Yunus, bivouacked in groves in which it lay hid all next day, and then after sunset advanced to Deir el Belah. About 1 a.m. on the 26th it was on the move again, crossed the Wadi Ghuzze near its mouth, not without some difficulty in finding the passage through the quicksands and took post at Tel el Ajjul to cover the crossing. At dawn it should have advanced, but a dense sea fog rolling inland from the coast forbade any movement, and not till 10 a.m. did it lift sufficiently to allow of an advance. Then the battalion deployed, two companies in front line, and pushed forward across the sand-hills. There was, but little opposition and casualties were light, about a dozen in all. The advance was continued for a mile when, as there was no intention of pressing the attack home on this flank, no further progress was attempted, the battalion remaining in the position reached till nightfall, when it fell back a little and formed square round the

See sketch 38

March 26th

guns. It was a troubled night for the Turks opposite kept on firing away and

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were constantly sending up Very lights; however, they never attempted any counter-attack and with daylight the battalion moved forward again to continue its demonstration. But on the other flank things had gone amiss. After complete success had seemed within the grasp of the attack the arrival of strong Turkish reinforcements developed a very dangerous pressure on the covering screen of mounted troops and the time lost through the sea fog in the morning proved an important factor in preventing the main infantry attack from achieving its objects. Nightfall came just too soon and the net result was that the troops had to withdraw behind the Wadi-Ghuzze. Substantial captures had been made and heavy losses inflicted on the Turks, but the main object of the attack had not been secured.

March 1917
2/4th
Battalion

During the afternoon of the 27th a hostile column was reported as advancing down the coast from Gaza and some reinforcements of Yeomanry arrived to assist Colonel Money's column. However, the reported advance never developed, and in the evening the column re-crossed the Wadi-Ghuzze and the battalion took up an outpost line on the high ground overlooking the Wadi from the West

In this line the next fortnight was spent, mainly in improving defences, a task in which the Turks also were busily engaged—and to only too good effect as appeared when, in the middle of April, the second attempt on Gaza was launched. This time the battalion's part was a definite attack, not a mere demonstration, though the ground to be crossed was nearly identical with that traversed on March 26th. The Fifty-Third Division was to push forward with its left on the coast, covering the left flank of the main attack against the Au el Muntar defences South of Gaza. Its first task was to secure a jumping-off line beyond the Wadi Ghuzze. This was achieved with little trouble on the evening of April 16th, the battalion being in reserve, and then on April 18th the real attempt began. The

April 1917

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first objective of the 160th Brigade was a hill S.W. of Gaza known as Samson Ridge, after which, if the main attack had got on equally well, the advance was to be continued against a set of trenches just East of the village of Sheik Ajlin. The 2/4th formed the left of the brigade with the 159th Brigade beyond it and the 2/10th Middlesex on the right.

At 8 a.m. the advance began, C and D Companies, under Captain Dowling and Major Downes, leading. Almost at once they came under sharp fire, especially from the left, which flank was "in the air," as the 159th Brigade had been held up, and casualties soon began to mount up. Colonel Money (1) was among those hit, on which Captain R. S. Cobb assumed command until in the evening Major Hohler, of the Middlesex Regiment, was sent up. By 11 a.m. A and B, under Captain Hodgson and Lieut. Wood, had had to reinforce the leading waves, and by mid-day the attack seemed about to be completely checked, mainly owing to the heavy casualties among the officers and the enfilade fire from both flanks. The tank attached to the battalion had broken down early in the day, the Division on the right was making very little progress, the Turkish fire was heavy and accurate. Captain H. de B. Wilson, the Adjutant, was killed about this time and the situation seemed critical. However, supports were forthcoming in the shape of the 4th Royal Sussex, and with their assistance the 2/4th got on the move

April 18th
1917
2/4th
Battalion

again. Captain Cobb's skilful handling of his Lewis gun did good service in helping the troops to gain ground, and after a hard fight Samson Ridge was reached and stormed. Lieut. Gregson was killed leading the final rush, while Major Downes, by whose determination and good leading the advance had been inspired, fell badly wounded at the foot of the ridge. By this time the tank had been sufficiently repaired to get forward,

(1) Fortunately his wound was not severe and he was able to resume command on May 1st.

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and it advanced against the El Arish Redoubt opposite Samson Ridge and did considerable execution, until nearly all its crew were hit by armour-piercing bullets. Indeed it would probably have been taken had not Lieut. Dunkerly pushed forward, ascertained how the tank's gun should be worked, kept up a fire which held the enemy at bay, and then, walking in front of the tank under the very heavy fire, got it moving again so that it was successfully guided back to our lines.

With the tank practically *hors de combat*, the troops exhausted by the hard going and the harder fighting, and the Division on the right held up some way from its objective, the task of re-organizing and consolidating was quite enough, and after about 3 p.m. no further advance was attempted. A certain number of men got beyond Samson Ridge and ably led by Captain Hodgson checked the development of a counter-attack, but at dusk they were drawn back to that position, tools were brought up and under Captain Hodgson's guidance and inspiration a tremendous amount of work was put into the digging of trenches. When the 158th Brigade arrived in the small hours of April 20th the position was quite defensible. But the battalion's casualties had been heavy, Lieut. Evans died of wounds that night, making in all three officers killed, of whom Captain Wilson, one of the original officers of the battalion and a most competent and popular Adjutant, was very specially regretted. Nine officers were wounded, 38 men killed, 145 wounded. But while the Fifty-Third Division had not managed to do more than take its first objective, elsewhere much less had been achieved, indeed, the operations as a whole had been a failure. Still, if the whole operation had failed, the 2/4th had acquitted themselves most creditably as was in some measure recognised by the grant of the M.C. to Major Downes, Captains Hodgson and Cobb, and Lieut. Dunkerley. (1)

(1) Colonel Money received a bar to his D.S.O.

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After this undisguisable check a stalemate followed in the Palestine theatre of war. It was six months before, under a new commander, a much augmented Force renewed the attack. For the 2/4th this was a period of constant hard work on the trenches, varied by occasional "rests" when training took the place of trench construction. This routine was disastrously interrupted one evening in May when, as the battalion was wending its way down a defile to a reserve area behind the Sheikh Abbas Ridge a German aeroplane dropped a bomb with deadly effect right into the middle of D Company, inflicting over 70 casualties. Captain Dillon and 2nd Lieut. Fricker were wounded, of the men 40 were killed on the spot or died of wounds soon after. It was a terrible and distressing moment, and though there was an ambulance with the column and help was prompt in coming to the wounded D was naturally much disorganized by its crippling losses.

April 18th
1917
2/4th
Battalion

April 20th

April – October
1917
2/4th Battalion

Apart from this disaster casualties were low, and though the battalion suffered severely from sandfly fever it was well up to strength both in officers and men when active operations were resumed.

The considerable increase in the strength of the E.E.F. since the April failure at Gaza, and still more the vast improvements in its mobility and administrative arrangements, made a far less restricted operation possible. There was no need to hurl the whole force against the formidable defences of Gaza, advantage could be taken of the undue extent of the Turkish line in proportion to their strength to threaten it in several places and so compel them to disperse their troops. The Fifty-Third Division was one of those detailed to operate against Beersheba, being charged with covering the left flank of the troops engaged in the capture of the town. Then when the fall of Beersheba allowed General Allenby to develop the second part of his plan and attack the Turkish defences round Tel el Sharia from the high ground N. and N.W. of Beersheba, the

See sketch 38

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Division had again to cover a flank. This time it was the right which it had to protect by an advance against the formidable position about Am Kohleh and Tel Khuweilfeh, to which the Turkish left had retired.

October 1917
2/4th Battalion

The 2/4th was thus employed rather in covering movements and diversions than in the main decisive stroke, but it had sufficiently severe fighting even so. Moving out from Deir el Balah to Shellal on October 24th, it held the Shellal defences for three days, pushed forward on the 27th to a position between Beit abu Taha and Beersheba, and then on the 30th advanced across the Wadi Hanafish to a new outpost position overlooking the Turkish railway running N.W. from Beersheba. Colonel Money had left to command the 159th Brigade, so Major Jude commanded the battalion.

October 31st, the day of the capture of Beersheba, brought the battalion no actual fighting, for no Turkish counter-attack developed from Sharia to disturb the skillfully planned and well-executed stroke at Beersheba. Nor did the next day, when the Division advanced through Beersheba to the hills North of the town, involve more than a hot march and hard work consolidating the new position about El Muwheile. Next evening, however, the Seventy-Fourth Division took over the line and the Fifty-Third moved into position for the attack it was to make on the following day.

October 31st

November 1st

November 2nd

This was to be delivered against the hills about Am Kohleh and El Khuweilfeh, the 160th Brigade's immediate objective being a ridge known as 1250, North of Am Kohleh. The 2/4th, with the 2/4th Queen's on the right, carried out the attack, advancing about 1.30 p.m. from the line which the Imperial Camel Corps was holding. Almost immediately they came under heavy fire, mostly from machine-guns, which, in that rugged and difficult country it was extremely hard to locate and no easier to silence when located, as it was

November 3rd

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almost impossible to get artillery forward along the goat tracks which were the only paths. Moreover the bracken which covered the hills gave splendid cover to snipers and made it hard to see where the enemy's line was. However, the troops got on well, Lieut. Nicoll, who was commanding A Company, being conspicuous for his gallantry and good leading, and by 6 p.m. a line of heights North of the track leading to Ain Kohleh had been reached. Here a halt was made for the night in readiness to advance against Hill 1250 at dawn. 2nd Lieut. Cambridge had been killed and Captain Cobb and Lieut.

November 3rd
1917
2/4th Battalion

Baker wounded, but the total casualties were under 40.

At 4 a.m. on November 4th the battalion stood to, and about an hour later such guns as had been got forward opened a brief bombardment while the machine-guns were taken up on to the hills to give covering fire. At 5.20 the attack started. A Company, on the right, got on well and gained its objective, but as the companies on the left were enfiladed by cleverly placed machine-guns and made little progress, it was quite isolated and dangerously exposed, and Lieut. Nicoll, finding it impossible to maintain his advanced position without support, had finally to fall back, but extricated his men with skill and success. Casualties this day had been more serious, Captain Dutton, Lieut. Edmonds and 2nd Lieut. Darlington had been killed with 40 men, 14 more were missing, and 52 wounded, together with 2nd Lieut. Naughton. But if Hill 1250 had not been carried the Turks had been forced to throw so many men into the fight in this quarter of the field that General Allenby could deliver his decisive stroke against their centre without any fear of a counter-attack by the defenders' reserves. Indeed the Turks delivered more than one counterattack on the Fifty-Third Division in the course of November 4th and 5th, though none of them achieved any success and all came in for sharp punishment, and

November 4th

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the Division and the mounted troops co-operating with it had engaged a disproportionately large part of the Turkish army.

For the 2/4th R.W.K. November 5th was a day without fighting, but it had proved very difficult to get rations or water up to the troops and the men suffered considerable privations. On the 6th the exhausted battalion was called upon for yet another attempt on Hill 1250, which, like its predecessors, was held up by enfilade machine-gun fire from the left flank. However, other troops captured Tel Khuweilfeh and an adjacent hill, and a Turkish effort to recover this last feature was decisively repulsed, with the result that about 5 p.m. on November 7th the outposts of the 2/4th, facing Hill 1250, saw the Turks opposite them beginning to go. Fire was opened on them, but it was not till next day that the battalion's patrols reported the hill all clear and that parties could be sent out to search for any surviving wounded and to bury the dead; it was then they had reason to realize that the casualties had not been all on the attacking side.

November 1917
2/4th Battalion

November
5th – 8th

November 8th

On November 9th the battalion moved East towards the Hebron road to support the Camel Corps who were being hotly pressed, but before it got up the Turks had retreated. With this, active operations on this side ceased for nearly a month. The main interest of the campaign now centred in the vigorous pursuit of the Turkish main body Northwards. Not till the British main body had turned Eastward and was working its way forward into the difficult hill country leading up to Jerusalem did the Fifty-Third Division advance again.

November –
December
1917

This month was spent by the 2/4th mostly in the outpost line near Ras el Nukb. It was a quiet period, mainly spent in re-organizing the battalion, for the enemy was quite inactive. Its total casualties had been 7 officers and 163 men, and in addition 3 officers and 129 men were sent to Hospital during November,

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quite apart from a lot of men who, from fighting over rocky ground, had got cuts and

abrasions which turned septic. By the end of the month the battalion was fully 25 per cent. below its November 1st strength. Colonel Beswick, of the R.W.F., arrived on November 20th to take command, upon which Major Jude reverted to second-in-command, the company commanders being now Captain Hodgson, Major Downes, Lieut. Willows and Lieut. Nicoll. This last officer received the M.C. for his gallantry and good leading on November 3rd and 4th, and the same distinction was conferred on the battalion's Chaplain, the Reverend W. H. Aglionby, who had done magnificent work in going out under the heaviest fire to search for the wounded.

November –
December
1917
2/4th Battalion

On December 4th the Fifty-Third Division began its advance through Hebron on Jerusalem, the 159th Brigade leading. Hebron was reached and occupied without much opposition, and on the 6th the march North was resumed. On the evening of the 8th the battalion was on the ridge just South of Bethlehem, which was entered by patrols next day and found to be clear. On the 10th it moved forward again, and had the extraordinary experience of marching into Jerusalem with its band playing, and of billeting in the Holy City itself. The advance from Beersheba had been carried out in bad weather; and with only one road for troops, guns and all transport it was really remarkable how well the battalion had fared for rations, while it had entirely escaped casualties, for the Turks, engrossed in opposing the advance of the main body from the Westward, offered hardly any opposition to this advance against their flank, although it was bound to render their position untenable if it succeeded. Several days of hard work on the main Jerusalem-Jaffa road followed, and then on December 15th the battalion moved to the Mount of Olives in preparation for an

December 4th

December 9th

See sketch 39

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attack on the El Aziziye ridge a little way East of Jerusalem.

December 1917
2/4th Battalion

December 17th

This ridge was a strong position, but the attack, carried out at dawn on December 17th by the battalion and the 4th Royal Sussex, was a complete success. B Company, led by Major Downes and well supported by the artillery, cleared the first objective at the point of the bayonet with great celerity, and then A and C, passing through, carried on the attack to the second objective and promptly proceeded to consolidate it. Over 100 prisoners were taken at a total cost of less than 20 casualties, and though the Turks made some attempts to counter-attack these were met by heavy fire and broken up before they could really get going. The importance of this well executed little stroke was that it pushed the Turks further away from Jerusalem and gave more room for developing other attacks to the Northward which were undertaken in the next few days. Thanks largely to the fact that these minor operations had allowed the British to take up a really satisfactory line North and East of Jerusalem, the great Turkish attempt to recover the city which was delivered on the 27th was completely repulsed. But it was a time of such real tension that the battalion had to remain in the line on its captured positions from December 17th to 29th. The weather was wet and stormy, and the troops, who were finding outposts nearly all the time, had much discomfort to undergo. They were not sorry when, after a shift of position on December 29th had merely allowed a company and half to be drawn back into reserve, the battalion was really relieved on January 1st, and taken back to billets in Birch. After the disappointments in which the 2/4th had shared in the spring it was something to have taken so creditable a part in achievements of such considerable military importance, which had perhaps even more value for political and propaganda purposes.

January 1st 1918

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Further afield the 1/4th and 1/5th Battalions had carried on with their duties, which differed little from the ordinary routine of a British infantry battalion at an Indian station. The ever-increasing demands for officers for the Indian Army, now under the able administration of Sir Charles Monro in process of rapid expansion, meant that the Territorial units in India were largely drawn upon to provide them. The men who had joined the Territorials before the war or had filled them up at its outbreak provided much excellent material for officers, and many N.C.O.'s and men left both battalions to take commissions. Otherwise the year passed uneventfully for them both till in the autumn the increase of the Indian Army made it possible to mobilize two more Divisions for Mesopotamia, and after nearly three years of garrison duty in India the 1/5th R.W.K. found themselves warned for active service. It was on October 20th that these orders arrived; six weeks later the battalion, which had been brought up to its war establishment by drafts of 100 each from the 4th Buffs and the Kent Cyclists, left Jubbulpore for Bombay. On December 5th it embarked, and after a six days' voyage landed at Basra on the 11th. Five days later it started for Baghdad, where the end of the year found it concentrated in Hinaidi Camp as a unit of the 54th Brigade of the Eighteenth Indian Division. It is some indication of the changes which the composition of the battalion had undergone since the outbreak of war that Colonel Frazer had with him only five other "pre-war" officers of the battalion, Majors Clark, Hills and Neame and Captains Richardson and Hay. (1)

1917
1/4th – 1/5th
Battalions

October –
December
1917
1/5th Battalion

December 16th

(1) The other officers who proceeded to Mesopotamia with the 1/5th were: Captains C. B. Pine, J. M. Prichard, T. L. Engledow (Adjt.), J. P. Carvoso, E. W. Carvoso, Lieuts. E. M. Neame, T. A. Stokes, J. H. Biggs, and H. F. Hawes, 2nd-Lieuts. C. E. Staddon, V. H. Russell, H. P. Taylor, J. A. Mollen, R. H. Proctor, H. E. Crippen, A. R. Key, A. N. W. Clark, W. T. K. Ware, and W. C. Lane, Lieut. and Quartermaster H. Cooke.

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Some time before the 1/5th arrived at Baghdad the 2nd Battalion had at last quitted the Euphrates for the Tigris. That battalion had moved back from Khamisiya to Nasiriya early in January, remaining there employed in the usual routine duties till early in June. The Euphrates line was quieter than ever after General Maude's triumphs at Kut and Baghdad, and the only notable event was the arrival in May of a draft of three officers and 398 men. With the complete reversal of the situation in Mesopotamia the maintenance of so large a force on the lower Euphrates was no longer necessary, and in March orders were issued for the transfer of the Fifteenth Division to the Tigris line. This was gradually effected; Divisional Headquarters moved in April, but the 2nd R.W.K. were left at Nasiriya until troops had been collected from the lines of communication to relieve them. Eventually the battalion quitted Nasiriya on June 7th, reaching Baghdad after a fortnight's journey. The change of station was not, however, accompanied by any immediate activity. The great heat precluded active operations in the summer, and by the time that the weather allowed the Fifteenth Division to deal its highly successful blow at the Turkish forces at Ramadi (September 27th) the 34th Brigade had been shifted to the newly-formed Seventeenth Indian Division under Major-Gen. Leslie, once again parting company with General Brooking to the regret both of that officer and of the battalion. This new formation began concentrating round Baghdad in August, and among its brigadiers was an officer of The Queen's Own in Brig.-Gen. R.J. T. Hildyard, who had originally come to Mesopotamia as G.S.O.I. of General Maude's Thirteenth Division. With the Seventeenth Division the 2nd R.W.K. moved up the Tigris in October as far as Sadiyah, covering 47 miles in 31 hours. This

1917
2nd Battalion

See Map B

move was in connection with General Cobbe's operations which resulted in the capture of Tekrit; it did not,

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however, involve the battalion in any fighting nor did active contact with the enemy follow when, early in December, the 34th Brigade began relieving the Meerut Division in the advanced positions about Samara on the latter Division being put under orders for Palestine. This move brought the 2nd R.W.K. to Akab, where it took over a section of the outpost line on the left bank of the Tigris and just West of the Shatt el Adhaim. But even here matters were extremely quiet—a few Turkish deserters came in and their mounted patrols were occasionally seen, but nothing disturbed the ordinary routine, and 1917 ended for the 2nd R.W.K. as uneventfully as it had begun

December 1917
2nd Battalion

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GAZA & BEERSHEBA
TO ILLUSTRATE OPERATIONS OF 2/4 R.W.K. 1917
1= SAMPSON RIDGE. 2= EL ARISH REDOUBT.

