

CHAPTER 31
EASTERN THEATRES IN 1918

The heavy fighting which had characterized the year 1918 on the Western Front and had brought to The Queen's Own such heavy losses and so many opportunities of distinction was not experienced in the Eastern theatres. The year ended in Macedonia, in Mesopotamia and in Palestine with striking and dramatic triumphs for the Allies, with the total overthrow of the hostile forces, with the final reaping of the fruits of past exertions. But these triumphs were to some degree the repercussion of the greater and more vital events in the theatre where the fate of the senior partner in the Central Powers' firm was being decided, it was only late in the year that Macedonia and Mesopotamia became the scene of real activity and that the representatives of The Queen's Own in the latter country got a belated chance of striking a blow. In Palestine there had been greater activity, but before the final blow The Queen's Own had ceased to be represented by any unit in that theatre of war.

With the repulse of the Turkish effort to recover Jerusalem the operations in Palestine had entered upon a phase of minor activities. Various small attacks were launched on points of tactical importance with the result that the Turks were gradually thrust back further North towards Nablus and Eastward into the Jordan valley. This was varied by strenuous work on improving roads and by tours of duty in the outpost line. In all these the 2/4th R.W.K. shared. After a spell of road-making in the beginning of January it was employed on January 18th to push forward the Divisional front by the capture of a prominent hill near the Bireh road known as 2984 or Sheikh Abdallah. The assault

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which was carried out by C and D Companies under Captains Willows and Cobb was a complete success, the position being captured with little opposition and less loss. But consolidation had not been long in process before the Turks opened a heavy artillery fire which they maintained for some hours, and this and their sniping inflicted a good many casualties, among the killed being Captain Nicoll, who had distinguished himself so much at Hill 1250 in November. However, all their counter-attacks were beaten off and the position was successfully consolidated. Ten days of outpost duty followed, then more road-making; then the battalion returned to the front line in the middle of February to advance again and occupy the village of Beir Dirwan and make several other minor advances, co-operating with the move of the Sixtieth Division against Jericho and with the capture of Rimmon by the 2/10th Middlesex. More road making while the Division was operating against the commanding height of Tel Asur was followed by a return to Jerusalem on the 15th for a short rest.

From Jerusalem the battalion next proceeded to the warmer if rather depressing climate of the Jordan valley, taking up a position North of Jericho and getting the chance of bathing in the Jordan. It was not actually employed in the operations East of the river but made a demonstration on March 29th to cover the withdrawal of the troops employed on the attack on Amman. April saw it back in the Judaeen Hills again where it spent the next three months. This was a time of inactivity for the British force in Palestine as a whole, though of plenty of hard work and long spells of duty. The reverses of March and April on the Western Front had exposed the fallacy of the notion that we were "over-insured in the West" and that the road to victory over the German lay in concentrating our efforts on the overthrow of the Turk. All schemes for an offensive in Palestine had to be postponed, two

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of the British Divisions and many units from the others were hurried to the critical theatre in France and Indian battalions began to appear in increasing numbers to replace them. The Fifty-Third Division was among those to be "Indianized," several of its battalions left for the Western Front, and in June it was announced that as no reinforcements could be sent out from England the 2/4th R.W.K. would have to be broken up to find drafts for the British units retained for service in the "Indianized" Divisions. Actually this fate did not overtake it till the middle of September, and it spent three quarters of June and a week of July undergoing a most unpleasant experience.

March – July
1918
2/4th Battalion

It was in line on a ridge overlooking Sinjol on which the enemy concentrated all their available artillery, including a particularly obnoxious 9.4 trench mortar. Every shell fired in the neighbourhood seemed to land on the ridge and the maintenance of the defences in repair meant perpetual hard work, while the activities of the enemy's aircraft were unpleasantly pronounced. A Turkish attack was expected but never came off, and early in July the battalion at last bade farewell to the line and moved into Corps reserve preparatory to being finally broken up. Of the 759 other ranks on its establishment at the end of August nearly half were transferred to the three surviving British battalions of the Sixtieth Division, or to the M.G.C. or other units. Several officers were sent off to various employments, and on September 11th the remainder moved down to Ramleh to entrain next day for Kantara, where they were posted to the Reinforcement Camp. It was hard on the 2/4th that after all its arduous work and many hardships it should have been denied the privilege of adding Allenby's coming triumph of Megiddo to the battle-honours of The Queen's Own, but it had done fine work and had left a most creditable record behind it.

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The two battalions of The Queen's Own in Mesopotamia were not destined to see any fighting till 1918 was well advanced. The beginning of the year had found that theatre of war in a somewhat stationary position, and though in March General Marshall set his left wing on the Euphrates in motion, bringing the Turkish force in that quarter to action near Khan Baghdadi and compelling it to surrender, the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Indian Divisions, being on the Tigris, were not employed, nor did they play any very active part in the second of General Marshall's enterprises. This was undertaken in April and May on the other flank against the mountains running Eastward from the left bank of the Tigris some way above Tekrit; it resulted in the capture of Kifri and Tuz Khurmatli and Kirkuk with another substantial haul of prisoners, while the Turks in this quarter retired behind the line of the Lesser Zab.

1918
2nd & 1/5th
Battalions

See map B

The only direct way in which these operations affected the battalions of The Queen's Own was that there was in consequence much redistribution of the positions of the centre of the force along the Tigris. At the beginning of the year the Seventeenth Division had been established along the river from Sumaikcheh to Samarra, the 2nd R.W.K. being at Akab, while the Eighteenth lay lower downstream, completing its concentration at Baghdad, the 5th R.W.K. being in camp at the Iron Bridge. On the departure of the Lahore Division for Palestine in March the Seventeenth moved upstream to take over the Samarra section which extended nearly to Tekrit. This meant for the 2nd R.W.K. a move forward from Akab to Samarra, begun on March 11th and completed on the 20th, its old position at Akab being taken over by its own 5th Battalion which moved upstream for the purpose, covering 72 miles in the course of five days. After spending April at Akab, during which time steady patrolling was carried on without encountering any enemy, the 5th

January- May
2nd & 5th
Battalions

5th Battalion

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moved out on May 3rd as part of a movable column which co-operated on the left of the Tigris with the Third Corps' operations in the Kifri area. 1918

The 5th moved out 19 officers and 727 rank and file, a reserve company of all sick and weakly men having been left behind under Major Neame. The column moved by Samarra to Daur and thence to Mohammed el Hassan, where it remained over a week, during which time it was employed on digging a defensive line and then returned to Samarra, to settle down into occupation of a portion of the bridge-head defences on the left bank. Here it remained throughout the summer, suffering not a little from the heat by day, though cool nights did something to mitigate conditions. For Mesopotamia the sick-rate was not high but a good many officers and men were invalided, among them Majors Neame and Hills and Colonel Frazer, in whose absence Colonel Clark was in command from early in June to September 18th. Captain Marshall rejoined from the 2nd Battalion and took over the Adjutancy. A few new officers arrived but no drafts, and with many men detached on various duties and occupations the strength of the battalion dwindled considerably although it had not yet been in action. 5th Battalion

Meanwhile the 2nd Battalion was having an equally uneventful time. It remained at Samarra until the beginning of October, finding many guards and men for various duties so as to relieve other troops for employment on the extension of the railway from Samarra to Tekrit which was being vigorously pushed on. Early in July troops had moved forward and occupied Tekrit to cover the construction of the line which reached that place in the middle of August. The main object of this extension was to facilitate the striking of a final blow at the last important Turkish force in Mesopotamia, the Sixth Turkish Army, which lay entrenched across the Tigris about 30 miles higher upstream where the river forces its way through the Jebel 2nd Battalion

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Hamrin range at the celebrated Fattah Gorge. Through this ran the road to Mosul, and though the main object of the operations it was proposed to undertake was the destruction of the Turkish forces, from the political point of view the occupation of Mosul was an objective of importance, if strategically subordinate to the overthrow of the Sixth Army and indeed mainly to be advocated as a means to that end. October 1918
2nd Battalion
see sketch 60

These operations were entrusted to General Cobbe's First Indian Corps with two cavalry brigades. Their scope was decidedly ambitious, involving a scheme for driving the Turks back from the Fattah Gorge position to a second line above the confluence of the Lesser Zab and the Tigris, after which the cavalry were to cross the Tigris higher up and plant themselves across the Turkish retreat on Mosul, while the Seventeenth Division on the right bank and the Eighteenth on the left simultaneously pressed forward up the Tigris. In a well-supplied country abounding in good roads the administrative problems involved in this scheme would have been serious; in the Tigris valley above Baghdad they were doubly formidable. On the right of the Tigris a line of steep hills—the Jebel Makhul—runs parallel to the river for many miles upstream from the Fattah position and with the waterless desert beyond these hills effectively protected the Turkish right against an attack in any force, on the left bank the Jebel Hamrin presented a very serious obstacle, while in the valley the so-called roads were hardly practicable for wheeled traffic. The Eighteenth Division were confident their road on the left bank must be the worst in Mesopotamia, but the Seventeenth on the right could not admit the Eighteenth's claim. The troops had therefore to be cut down to the absolute minimum of transport and kit and had no inconsiderable discomforts and hardships to endure in the course of the operations. 2nd & 5th Battalions

For the 2nd R.W.K. the operations began on October 7th when the battalion left Samarra by rail for

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Tekrit where the Division was concentrating. A fort night's halt at Tekrit, mainly spent in working on the pushing forward of the railway above Tekrit, was marked by an outbreak of influenza which sent four officers and over 100 men to hospital and sadly reduced the battalion, already none too strong, for no drafts had arrived since the beginning of the year. Then on October 21st the battalion led the advance of the 34th Brigade upstream to Abu Rajash, a 15mile march. Next day the move was continued to Khan Suraimyah, 27 miles North of Tekrit and 8 miles short of Fattah, and on October 23rd the move against the Fattah position began, the 34th Brigade being in Divisional reserve. By evening the 51st and 52nd Brigades had pressed forward to within four miles of the Turkish lines. Everything seemed to point to a severe fight for the Fattah Gorge next day, but morning showed that the Turks had gone, and General Hildyard's 51st Brigade and the cavalry pushed on after them, leaving the battalion and the rest of the 34th Brigade to assist the artillery to get their guns forward over the apology for a road which ran through the gorge. It was a difficult task and kept the battalion only too well employed till the afternoon of the 26th, when it was ordered up to rejoin its Brigade, the rest of which had already gone forward.

October 1918
2nd Battalion

October 21st
October 22nd

October 24th

October 26th

Meanwhile the 5th Battalion had come into action.. It had moved forward from Samarra on October 8th and halted about ten days at Tekrit. Then on October 19th it advanced thirteen miles, and that night pushed on again to the foothills of the Jebel Hamrin where the 54th Brigade was concentrating, seven miles from the left flank of the Turkish position at the Fattah Gorge. The battalion took up an outpost position and found itself in touch with the enemy. Here its patrols were active and did extremely well in some encounters with the Turkish outposts. On the 23rd the 54th Brigade pushed forward along the crest of the Jebel Hamrin to

5th Battalion
October
8th-18th

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attack the left of the Fattah position, on the morning of October 24th in conjunction with the frontal attack by the Seventeenth Division on the right bank of the Tigris. It was a hard and difficult advance over the broken ground along the top of the ridge, ideal country for a delaying action. However, no opposition was encountered and the advance was continued right on into the Turkish position which proved to have been evacuated. Eventually the battalion moved down nearer to the river to support the Seventeenth Division's attack, only to find that it also was going forward unopposed. Next day the advance up the left bank continued, the 5th R.W.K. being detailed as escort to the 337th Brigade R.F.A. and coming under a heavy fire in doing so. A and D Companies pushed forward steadily despite the shelling until they had taken up a good position, the 341st Battery coming into action 1,000 yards in rear. This battery, however, suffered severely; the Turkish guns which till then had been shelling the escort without much success managed to get the range of the British guns, bombarded them with 5.9 inch shells, drove the detachments from the guns and inflicted much damage on the material. The escort, however, stuck to their positions until long after the shelling had ceased, and then about 8 p.m. fell back to the river bank on ascertaining that the portions of the battery which remained mobile had also withdrawn. Its casualties, 3 men killed and 2nd Lieut. Gilham and 8 men wounded, were far lower than might have been expected.

October 1918
5th Battalion

October 25th

The 5th was not again to be actually in action. After re-assembling on the 26th the whole

battalion went forward that afternoon to the Lesser Zab, still acting as escort to the guns. For the next two days it remained on the Zab finding outposts, crossed that river on the 29th, and then moved forward to reinforce the 53rd Brigade which had been pushed up to support the cavalry under Generals Cassels and Norton. These

October
27th & 28th

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had carried out their programme admirably, fording the Tigris at the Hawaish creek some miles above Shargat and thus interposing between the main body of the Turks and Mosul. Though attacked from the North by reinforcements coming downstream from Mosul the cavalry had hung on in a most exposed and isolated position, had kept back the reinforcements and at the same time barred the retreat of the main body which was retiring upstream under the steady and successful pressure of the Seventeenth Division.

October 1918
5th Battalion

In applying this pressure the 2nd Battalion had taken a leading part. When on the evening of October 26th it got up to the front, after an exhausting march of 16 miles, and rejoined its brigade from which it had been for the time detached, it found that the Turks, standing at bay in the naturally strong and skilfully prepared Humr position at the bend in the Tigris just above the confluence with the Lesser Zab, had managed to check the advance of the 51st Brigade, even when it had been reinforced by the 112th Infantry and 114th Mahrattas of the 34th Brigade. The advance, however, had been most gallantly pressed, and before daybreak next day the British patrols reported the enemy to be retiring. The pursuit was as vigorously urged as possible, but the appalling state of the track which did duty for a road prevented its leaders from getting beyond Qalat al Bint and the enemy were able to retire, more or less at leisure, upon an entrenched position three miles south of Shargat. But the day's march was marked by little opposition from the enemy, if by much passive obstruction from the country.

October 26th
2nd Battalion

October 27th

October 28th

October 28th saw the 2nd R.W.K. heading the advance of the 34th Brigade (1) against this new position.

(1) The brigades had been cut down to three battalions apiece a little earlier owing to Indian battalions having been detailed to proceed to Salonica, the 31st Punjabis being selected for transfer from the 34th Brigade. The battalion went into action with 17 officers and 456 men, Captain Aldworth, who had been left in hospital at the Fattah Gorge, appearing just as the orders for the attack were being issued.

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It had the 112th Infantry moving on its right rear echeloned back nearly two miles while the 114th Mahrattas followed in its tracks. The advance was terribly delayed by having to cross the many nalas which intersected its path. More than once all Lewis-gun mules had to be closed to the one point where one of these deep nalas could be crossed. However, after ten miles from its bivouac had been covered the cavalry reported that the enemy had been located, standing in a strong position astride the Mosul Road and about five miles ahead. On this the battalion deployed, B Company on the right, C on the left, D behind C and A, reduced by sickness to four Lewis-gun sections, on D's right rear. Two sections of the Brigade Machine-Gun Company and a company of the 114th Mahrattas were in support.

October 28th
1918
2nd Battalion

Under a heavy fire the men pressed steadily forward, keeping direction and intervals admirably, 1,000 yards from the enemy they extended, and though only twelve guns were available to support them, and their fire could not possibly amount to an effective barrage, they swept on against the enemy's front line. All possible use was made of covering fire by the machine-guns, and 200 yards from the enemy's position the company of the 114th

came up level with the right. As the advance went forward it came under very effective machine-gun fire, upon which Colonel Woulfe-Flanagan, on his own initiative, ordered the assault,

without pausing to wait for the turning movements on his flanks which had been held up by the difficult character of the country.

The assault was immediately successful, largely thanks to L/Cpl. James, who pushed forward to locate a troublesome machine-gun and then rushed it himself, killing the crew, by which act he immediately relieved the situation; 800 yards further on lay the enemy's second line, strengthened at each end by a strong redoubt. Almost without a pause the troops pressed on against this position. On the left

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October 28th
2nd Battalion

a strong point West of the Mosul road threatened trouble, but Captain Aldworth with a small party promptly advanced against it, working round so as to take it in flank while C.Q.M.S. McCormick with a few men attacked it in front and a section of machine-guns gave effective covering fire, the net result being the capture of the strong point with 100 prisoners and six machine-guns. On the right 2nd Lieut. White and a party of C and D Companies were the first to reach the Turkish line, then 2nd Lieut. Capes arrived on his left with some of B, Captain Piggott and Lieut. Fry prolonged the line to the left, and between them the redoubt on the cliff edge at the end of the line was stormed and the position consolidated, the arrival rather later of the rest of the 114th Mahrattas enabling a gap in the centre to be filled and the position secured. C.Q.M.S. Kemp, on the fall of both officers of C Company, led his men forward with great initiative and ability, while Sergt. Burnham, though himself wounded, continued to lead his platoon, setting a fine example of coolness and perseverance.

The attack had been a brilliant success. The Brigadier, General Wauchope, has written of the "excellent local leadership" displayed. "The West Kent Regiment," he writes, (1) "lost 25 per cent. of their number, but had any mistake been made, had control been lost at any rate over those very widely-extended platoons, had full use not been made of all covering fire available, had the men failed to respond to their leaders, then had their losses been doubled and the issue hung in the balance." The losses had certainly been heavy in proportion to the numbers engaged. Captain Schofield, Lieuts. Northey and Wilson had been killed with 35 men, Captain Patisson and Lieut. Bennett were wounded and 72 men. But the prisoners taken, 160, alone exceeded the casualties, and the determination

(1) "The Destruction of the Sixth Turkish Army."—Journal of the R.U.S.I., 1919.

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October 28th
1918
2nd Battalion

with which the battalion had pressed its attack, coupled, with a threat to the Turkish flank through the advance of a co-operating column on the left, had sent the Turks back once again. They were effectively cornered now, for all their efforts had failed to dislodge General Cassels and his 11th Cavalry Brigade from their position astride the road to Mosul, and before evening not only had the leading troops of the Eighteenth Division got into touch with him but General Norton's 7th Cavalry Brigade had arrived to reinforce. There was to be one more hard fight when, on October 29th, General Hildyard's 51st Brigade pushing forward against the enemy's main position North of Shargat met severe opposition, culminating in a vigorous counterattack, only checked with some difficulty by the splendid steadiness and gallantry of the H.L.I. and the 114th Mahrattas whom the 34th Brigade pushed forward as reinforcements. Once again, however, the 2nd B.W.K. was

October 29th

Brigade pushed forward as reinforcements. Once again, however, the 2nd R.W.K. was denied the chance of distinction. It was kept back in support and merely dug in in second line, sending forward one small party to assist the 114th Mahrattas.

Next morning the battalion stood to arms at 5.30, but as it moved forward for a renewed attack by the 34th and 51st Brigades it was greeted by a bugle-call, reminiscent of manoeuvres, which seemed strangely out of place on active service—the “Stand Fast.” The whole Turkish force, over 8,000 officers and men, had surrendered unconditionally with thirty guns, eighty machine-guns and all their material. It was a complete and crushing victory, and the share of the 2nd Battalion in bringing it about was singled out for particular praise by the Divisional Commander, who spoke of the “superhuman exertions of all ranks,” the initiative of subordinate leaders, the gallantry of the men, the splendid way in which, despite all exertions and exhaustion, they had never failed to respond to the calls made on them. If the 2nd had not been fortu

October 1918
2nd Battalion

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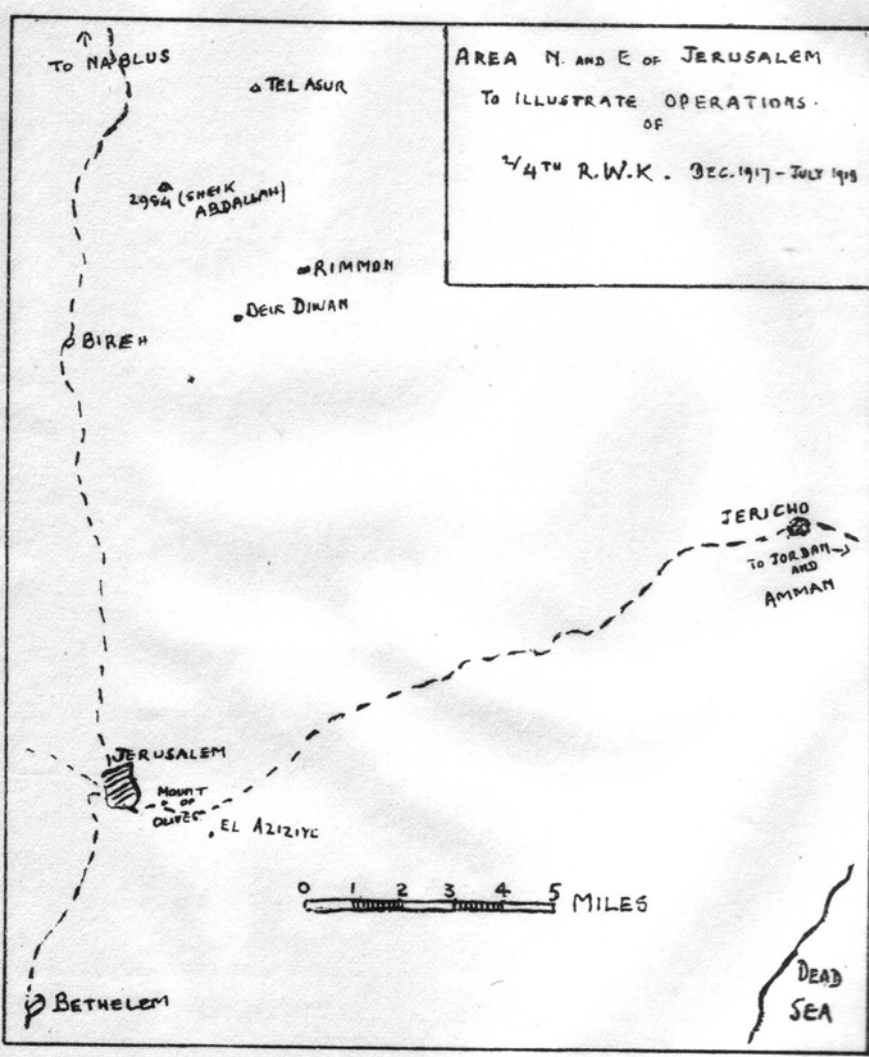
nate in getting opportunities of distinction in battle, Nasiriya and Qalat Shergat, its two actions of importance, had shown of what it was capable when given its chance, and the rewards which fell to its lot for its share in the Turkish overthrow speak for themselves. Colonel Woulfe-Flanagan and Captain Aldworth got the D.S.O., Sergt. Burnham, C.Q.M.S. Kemp and L/Cpl. James the D.C.M., C.S.M. Godden, Corpls. Eves and Francis, L/Cpls. Knight and Weston, Ptes. Bromfield, Cheeseman, Locker, Philpott, Rogers and Thompson the M.M.

5th Battalion

The Turkish surrender had prevented the 5th R.W.K. getting a real chance in action. Any other opportunities it might have hoped for were snatched from it by the news that an Armistice had been concluded with Turkey and that hostilities would cease forthwith (October 31st). On this the Eighteenth Division did actually move forward to Mosul, and the 5th R.W.K., now down to 17 officers and 409 men present, among whom only 5 officers, Colonel Frazer, Major Clark and Captains Hay, Richardson and Marshall had belonged to the pre-war 5th, had the satisfaction of reaching Mosul where the end of the year found it providing guards and picquets for duty in that city, not to mention various fatigues and working parties. For its demobilization was destined to be long deferred. With the 2nd the case was different. On the news of the Armistice it had been sent off at once down to railhead in charge of 1,000 prisoners. On the way down it picked up both the great-coats and the exiguous 10-lb. kits which it had had to drop by the wayside on the move forward, and on reaching rail-head it was able to hand its charges over to the Lines of Communication staff; after which it was employed on railway construction almost to the end of the month when it moved down to Tekrit, to send off its first batch of 14 men to the United Kingdom for demobilization in the course of December.

2nd Battalion
November

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SKETCH 59.

