

CHAPTER 6 MESOPOTAMIA 1915

The long deferred orders to mobilize which reached the 2nd R.W.K. on January 19th, found it scattered over several stations, "apparently all stranded high and dry in India," as one writer put it. Its destination was Mesopotamia; there, as has so often happened, an expedition begun with a limited object was developing into something much larger. The original "I.E.F., (1) D," consisting of the Sixth Indian (Poona) Division under Lieut.-Gen. Sir Arthur Barrett, had been sent out to secure the pipe-line by which oil was brought down to Abadan Island from the oil-fields to the N.E., and also to prevent any possibility of the Persian Gulf ports being utilized as the base of efforts to foment trouble in India or on the N.W. frontier. Its earlier operations had resulted, by the first week of December, in the occupation of Basra and Qurna, but it soon became apparent that one Division would hardly secure the positions gained against a Turkish counter-attack, and reinforcements from India and Egypt were requisitioned, the 2nd R.W.K. being detailed as the British battalion of the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade, commanded by Major-Gen. K. S. Davison, which was placed under orders for Mesopotamia in January.

January 1915
2nd Battalion

Thus on January 28th Headquarters and three companies, (2) with Colonel Pedley in command, left Nasirabad for Bombay, where they arrived two days later, sailing the same day (January 30th) on the S.S.

(1) i.e., Indian Expeditionary Force.

(2) The double company system had just been adopted.

"Elephanta." (1) At Karachi No. II. Company (late C and G Companies), under captain Nelson, was picked up, and on February 6th the "Elephanta" reached Basra, where the battalion was transhipped to a river steamer and a couple of lighters for a crowded but fortunately brief voyage up-stream to Qurna, the junction of the Tigris with the old stream of the Euphrates. Here it went into camp on the left bank of the Tigris. The position was none too comfortable, the ground was low-lying, the river was rising steadily, and as it was also raining persistently the troops had to spend almost as much time on digging dams and banks to keep out the water as on defences against the Turks, who were doing all they could to flood the British positions by sending out raiding parties to cut the "bunds" along the river banks some way higher up. This led to some nocturnal encounters with these raiders, who gave considerable trouble, while the Turkish positions, some 2½ miles to the Northward, were occasionally shelled by the British guns; it was one of these bombardments that led to the issue of a Brigade order: "Works and fortifications are not to be used as grand-stands for viewing the effects of artillery fire upon the enemy." There was some sniping at night, but the battalion's main employment was digging in a water-logged country, and eventually

February 1915
2nd Battalion

(1) The battalion embarked 908 strong, being the normal war establishment of a British battalion in India plus ten per cent. first reinforcements; any men surplus to this establishment or medically unfit were left as a depot at Nasirabad under Captain Case Morris. The officers who embarked with the battalion were: Lt.-Col. S. H. Pedley (commanding), Major R. J. Woulfe-Flanagan (second-in-command), Captain A. E. Hardy (Adjutant), Lieut. C. H. Battye (Machine Gun Officer), Lieut. J. B. B. Ford (Signalling Officer), Lieut. J. K. Kay (Transport Officer); Lieut. F. Grey (Quartermaster), R.S.M. P. Walker, R.Q.M.S. A. L. Bellion. No. I Company: Captains H. D. Belgrave and M. W. Graham, Lieuts. V. S. Clarke and A. G. Balbernie. No. II. Company: Captains J. W. Nelson and A. K. Searight, Lieuts. O. G. Barnes and N. B. Howell, 2nd-Lieut. R. Harrison. No. III. Company: Captains C. R. Ingram and O. Y. Hibbert, 2nd-Lieuts. A. Howe and A. H. Piggott. No. IV. Company: Major C. E. Kitson, Captain M. J. Dinwiddy, Lieut. A. S. Bredon, 2nd-Lieuts. A. C. Elton and C. V. Madgett.

the floods rose to such an extent that the camp had to be shifted across the river to rather drier ground in Qurna itself.

Feb – April
1915
2nd Battalion

At the end of February the battalion moved to Basra, where the conditions were much the same. The camp was situated among date palms in low-lying ground cut up in all directions by irrigation channels. The river being tidal and the soil loose, the water was apt at high tide to percolate through the ground and fill up any hollow or low-lying places, so that the unwary often awoke to find themselves awash in what had seemed overnight a desirable spot for a tent or bivouac. One important duty that fell to the battalion's lot during this time was made very arduous by the floods. This was that of escorting convoys to the outposts at Shaiba, about 12 miles West of Basra, a duty which involved a march there and back of nearly 24 miles through mud and water, in which men often went in up to their knees or even thighs. The whole country looked like a vast lake, and the road could only be distinguished by a line of telegraph posts showing above the water and by various abandoned A.T. carts along the line. On several occasions the mules pulling the carts were drowned and the work was so exhausting that men often had to be helped through the last stages of the march by slinging rifles and joining hands. But the stay at Basra was not to be very long. In February a small British Column had been sent off up the Karun River to Ahwaz for the protection of the pipeline, and on March 3rd this force had an unsuccessful encounter with a much stronger Turkish force backed up by a large number of Arabs. A gun was lost, and only through the steadiness of a small detachment of the Dorsets was disaster narrowly averted. The reinforcement with British infantry of the Ahwaz column was clearly imperative, and the very next day Nos. II. and IV. companies, under Captain Nelson and Major Kitson respectively, with

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Major Woulfe-Flanagan in command, was shipped off to Ahwaz, arriving two days later.

April – June
1915
2nd Battalion

The position there was not unlike that at Qurna, the British were occupying an entrenched camp on the riverbank with the enemy in observation at a respectful distance. The camp was occasionally shelled, and sniping at night sometimes developed into a serious fusillade, but no definite attack was attempted. A week after the departure of the first half battalion Headquarters followed, having a sharp brush with Arabs on the way up at Ohma Tomair, while five days later the remaining companies also came up. But even then the British force on the Karun remained inactive until after the hard-fought action at Shaiba (April 14th) (1) This decisive repulse of the Turkish counter-stroke down the Euphrates on Basra completely altered the situation, and allowed the concentration in the Ahwaz area of the bulk of the newly-organized Twelfth Indian Division, now under General Gorringe. The main object before it was to teach the Beni Taruf Arabs to abstain from molesting the pipeline and to drive out of Arabistan the Turkish force which was supporting their opposition.

On April 27th two companies of the battalion formed part of a column which reconnoitred the enemy's camp near Ahwaz, only to find it evacuated; on the news of Shaiba the Turks had retired across the Kharka river and were now 20 miles to the Westward. This was the beginning of six weeks of exhausting operations against a most elusive enemy. It was a strenuous time of hard marching under a burning sun, with the

thermometer in the tents going as high as 120 deg., on half rations, with a minimum of kit and rest, sometimes varied by getting among quicksands, into which transport animals sank up

(1) On the day of the action at Shaiba the Turks made a demonstration in force at Ahwaz, shelling the camp heavily and showing infantry more freely than they had previously done. They may have intended to invest Ahwaz had their attack on Shaiba succeeded, but with their defeat at a Shaiba their activities round Ahwaz slackened off.

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to their girths. Near the banks of the Kharka there was water, but so brackish that it increased rather than assuaged thirst, being moreover “as warm as soup and about the same colour.” (1) The Kharka was both rapid and wide, a serious obstacle which was only crossed with considerable difficulty and the exercise of much ingenuity in improvising methods, though the enemy showed no disposition to make a stand and offered little serious opposition. The battalion had a good deal of skirmishing, but was in reserve on May 15th when one of the chief villages of the district, Khafajiyu, was successfully attacked and destroyed; indeed it had rather to endure hardships and privations than to encounter actual enemies. It was during the march to this village that the battalion suffered special hardships. Its brigade had not crossed the Kharka river at Illa, where the bulk of the force had, and the last stage of the march was a terrible time. Men were fainting everywhere, and as there were only about 20 riding mules to take the place of an ambulance only the worst cases could be given a mount, and the majority, when brought to, had to stagger along as best they could. Sometimes those who were riding had to get off and walk to make room for worse cases. The battalion owed a great deal to its bheestis, who did splendid work, going off to the river at every halt and fetching water back over a considerable distance, thanks to which the men succeeded in completing the march. After the capture of Khafajiyu the brigade crossed the river, though not without difficulty; all the transport animals had to be swum across and the men and equipment to be ferried across on improvised pontoons made of light framework of boxwood covered with canvas and paddled with entrenching shovels, which proved quite effective for the purpose. But the operations were highly successful. A sharp lesson was inflicted on the Beni Taruf, the security of the pipe-line was assured,

May – June
1915
2nd Battalion

(1) cf. “The Long Road to Baghdad,” E. Candler, i. 244.

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and Persian Arabistan cleared of the enemy. Moreover, General Gorringe was able to co-operate effectually with the advance of the Sixth Indian Division up the Tigris on Amara.

June – July
1915
2nd Battalion

This force, the original “I.E.F. D,” now under General Townshend, had defeated the Turkish forces near Qurna in the remarkable amphibious encounter in the marshes generally known as “Townshend’s Regatta,” in which The Queen’s Own was only represented by a little party who had been detailed to act as marines on the river flotilla when the battalion moved to Ahwaz. The steamers had hurried on ahead after the action, reaching Amara on June 3rd and receiving its surrender. To this result General

Gorringe's operations contributed directly. They had already diverted Turkish reinforcements from the Tigris, and now a portion of his force threatened to intercept the retreat of the Turkish forces and consequently accelerated their withdrawal. His troops had remained in camp for a few days trying to collect supplies which were none too plentiful, the only fuel available being camel dung. For the whole force to move against Amara was out of the question, but a column was organised under Colonel Dunlop, of the 44th Merwaras, who was commanding the 12th Brigade, as Major-Gen. Lean, who had recently replaced General Davison, had gone sick. This included the battalion (less No. IV. Company), the 67th and 90th Punjabis and a field battery, and this force, cutting loose from its communications, pushed for Amara, while the main body of the force under General Gorringe himself returned to Ahwaz. Colonel Dunlop's column got near enough to hear General Townshend's guns, but a fight was denied it, and in the final move from Bisaitin to Amara, a matter of ten days, in the course of which the marshes had to be crossed, the battalion's trials had reached the culminating point. The heat was intense,

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the men were heavily laden, rations were short and water brackish. But if the 2nd R.W.K. had no chance of proving its qualities in action, it distinguished itself by the lowness of its sick rate and by the splendid way in which the men had stuck to their work, often fainting from sheer exhaustion and yet managing to march in with the rear guard.

July 1915
2nd Battalion

But the battalion was soon to have fighting of quite sufficient severity to satisfy anyone. General Nixon, who had taken over the Mesopotamian command early in April, had received instructions to prepare for the effective occupation of the Basra vilayet (district) which practically meant securing the Tigris up to Kut al Amara and the Euphrates to Nasiriya. With Townshend already at Amara, nearly 100 miles up-stream from Qurna, it was necessary to secure the left flank by capturing Nasiriya before attempting an advance beyond Amara. The Twelfth Division was detailed for this work and the battalion was accordingly withdrawn down-stream to Basra, where, on July 3rd, a draft joined from India. Five days later a start was made, Headquarters and Nos. I. and III. Companies leaving by steamer for Qurna, whence the Euphrates was followed to a point six miles below Nasiriya. Here General Gorringe's leading brigade had been temporarily brought to a standstill, after having overcome the first opposition encountered a dozen miles lower down.

The battalion found the British troops established in trenches among palm-groves on both banks of the river, with the Turks strongly entrenched opposite them. Anything of the nature of a turning movement was precluded, as except for belts of dry ground extending a few hundred yards inland on both banks of the river the country was under water, so direct attack was inevitable. Some sand hills on the right bank of the Euphrates were believed to be the key of the position, and the battalion was detailed to attack them,

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but after Captain Graham had carried out a most daring and useful reconnaissance of the position, the orders were cancelled, and when the attempt was made it was entrusted to a battalion of the 30th Brigade, who despite much gallantry failed to secure the position. In this attack the men had to wade through floodwater, and when they had to withdraw many of the wounded were drowned. However, an attack in the early hours of July 14th had established the British advanced line within about 400 yards of the Turkish trenches, but the battalion was not engaged in this, though it took over the front-line trenches on the 17th and held them for two days under a good deal of sniping. On July 20th the remaining companies (1) arrived, having left Basra on the 16th, but being delayed through their steamer taking the ground in the shallow Hammar Lake; the men had had to be disembarked and to help to haul the steamer over the shallows by means of ropes.

July 1915
2nd Battalion

By July 23rd General Gorrige had completed his preparations. The 30th Brigade was to attack on the right bank, the 12th on the left. The Turkish trenches on this bank ran back rather obliquely from the river along the edge of a grove of date palms. On the left of their line were a couple of fortified towers, in rear of which the Maiyadiya creek ran roughly parallel to the trench-line. At the right or river end of the Turkish trenches the lines were about 400 yards apart, and at this point the battalion was posted. It was to lead the attack, some of the 90th Punjabis were in support, the rest of the 90th and the 67th Punjabis holding a trench in continuation to the right of the battalion's front line. The battalion's machine-guns, with the rest of those of the Brigade, were in the trenches of the 90th to assist in giving covering-fire.

July 23rd
1915
See sketch 10

(1) No. IV. had not shared in the move to Amara but had been sent back from Bisaitin to Ahwaz, and had come direct from that station to Basra; rejoining prior to the move up the Euphrates.

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No. III. Company was on the left, the directing flank, with No. I. On its right, No. IV. Supported No. III., No. II. Being behind No. I.

July 24th
1915
2nd Battalion

At 5 a.m. on the 24th the bombardment opened. It was a heavy one judged by Mesopotamian standards, and the guns made good practice, but when the time came for the advance the Turks were by no means shaken and put up a stiff resistance. The leading companies went over the top at 5.30 and pushed rapidly forward. As the date palms concealed the advance of our infantry from the artillery it was arranged that the left flank of the advancing troops should carry a conspicuous yellow flag to mark the progress of the advance. This naturally attracted the attention of the Turkish marksmen, and many times the flag-bearer was shot down, but as often as this happened the flag was promptly picked up and carried forward unflinchingly by a new bearer. On reaching the edge of the date palms in front of the trenches the leaders came under a very heavy fire, which for the moment checked the attack. But Major Kitson and the supports were close behind, and as they came up the leading companies pushed on with them. "It was the most magnificent sight," wrote an officer of the 90th Punjabis, "to watch those fellows going up under the terrific fusillade from their front in spite of the casualties, just as if they were on a manoeuvre parade. As soon as they got up to the trenches they wheeled round to the right, so we had to stop our fire for fear of hitting them They got in with their bayonets and all we could see from where we

hitting themThey got in with their bayonets and all we could see from where we were was Mr. Turk running as if the Devil himself were after him.” What had happened was that on the right, even after the arrival of the supports, the next rush had come to a standstill 100 yards from the enemy’s trenches. However, while the right companies were firing at the Turkish loopholes and keeping down the rifle-fire of

the defence, (1) Nos.III. and IV. on the left had pushed on unchecked. Here there was a little more cover and, led by Major Kitson, they had got in all mixed up together and carried the Turkish trench. Sergt. Wannell, of No. IV., was one of the first into the Turkish trenches, and led a party from point to point, clearing the Turks out with rifle and bayonet, as well as using bombs (2) with great effect. C.S.M. Elliott was also among the first to reach the enemy’s lines and led several bayonet charges, while C.S.M. Newbrook (3) was also conspicuous for gallantry and good leading, remaining with his men, though severely wounded, until the end of the day.

July 24th
1915
2nd Battalion

Directly Nos. III. and IV. got in on the Turkish flank and began to work to the right, Nos. I. and II. sprang up again and swept over the trenches opposite them, a company of the 90th Punjabis following close behind. A good many Turks were bayoneted there and then, many were taken, and the remainder bolted to their left. Then, while the other two companies pushed straight ahead with their left on the riverbank, Nos. I. and II. worked steadily forward toward the towers on the Turkish left. The enemy put up a good fight and reinforcements from the 90th and 67th Punjabis came up to find the firing-line of the battalion beginning to run out of ammunition and held up for the time on the edge of a cleared space; Nos. I. and II. at the towers, Nos. III. and IV. near Thorneycroft Corner on the riverbank. It was now about 7.15; the enemy were putting up a stubborn resistance, and Colonel Pedley reported that his left was very weak. Half

(1) It says a good deal for British markmanship that when the Turkish dead in these trenches were afterwards examined the majority of them proved to have been shot through the face.

(2) This was the first occasion on which the 2nd Battalion had used bombs, the kind employed being the “Hales” grenade.

(3) All these N.C.O.’s received the D.C.M., together with Ptes. Bye and Bridger, decorated for gallantry in succouring wounded, and Pte. Howe, who went to the assistance of a wounded officer who was attacked by six Turks, five of whom he shot or bayoneted.

a battalion of the 67th Punjabis came up on this flank and reinforced, and thus assisted and replenished with ammunition the battalion got forward again. One company of the 90th Punjabis reached the front of the attack to find about twenty of The Queen’s Own, under Sergt. Edwards, (1) well ahead of everyone else, and hotly engaged with about 100 Arabs, but with the aid of the 90th the right-hand tower was rushed about 9 o’clock, and half-an-hour later mixed parties of Punjabis and R.W.K. stormed the second tower after a hard tussle. A fresh advance then drove the enemy beyond the Maiyadiya Creek, four guns being captured at this point and another village with more towers cleared in the process. There was another pause for reorganization and then, about mid-day, another advance, with the 67th Punjabis in the lead this time, and the battalion on their left. Opposition was lessening by now and the enemy’s final line of defence, at the Sadanawiya Creek, was carried with much less difficulty than their stubbornly defended original position, the battalion assisting the 67th Punjabis with

July 24th
1915
2nd Battalion

effective covering-fire, while fine work was done by Captain Nunn, R.N., who came up the river in a stern wheel steamer and, despite heavy fire, enfiladed the Turkish trenches effectively with the 3 pounder which it carried. Meanwhile the 30th Brigade had been equally successful; on both banks the Turks had been routed, and by the evening they were in full retreat.

The great strength of the position attacked, the stubborn resistance offered and the very unfavourable conditions in which the action was fought, a shade temperature over 110 deg and a damp and humid atmosphere calculated to be exhausting even to the lightly clad, (2) make the action of Nasiriya an achievement worthy of the highest praise, and the battalion's

(1) This N.C.O. received the D.C.M. for his gallantry.

(2) In no other theatre of war," writes one War Diary, "are men put to such a high test of endurance."

conduct earned it a well-deserved commendation from General Gorringe. In his despatch describing the Nasiriya operations he wrote that "the gallantry of the Royal West Kent, under Lieut.-Col. Pedley, set an example which was followed without hesitation by the remainder of the brigade. This initial success gave an impetus to the operations, the value of which it is difficult to over-estimate. Too much credit cannot be given for the splendid work they did during that eventful hour." And when addressing the battalion a few weeks later he spoke no less emphatically: no words of mine," said he, "can adequately express my appreciation and feeling of praise to you for your conduct on July 24th." The D.S.O. was subsequently awarded to Captain Nelson for these operations, Lieut. Balbernie received the M.C., and Colonel Pedley the C.B., while Major Kitson was promoted to Brevet Lieut.-Col. (1)

July – Nov
1915
2nd Battalion

But the battalion's losses had been heavy; less than 500 of all ranks had actually gone over the top (excluding the machine-gun section, reserve ammunition party and other details), six officers and 150 men were in the casualty list. Three officers had been killed, Captain Graham, a competent and popular officer of over ten years' service, who had been a mainstay of the 2nd Battalion's athletics, Lieut. Howell, another popular leader, and 2nd-Lieut. Elton, who had been promoted into the Regiment shortly after the outbreak of war. Captains Nelson and Ingram were wounded, as well as 2nd-Lieut. Howe. As Captain Searight and Lieut. Barnes had already been invalided, while Major Woulfe-Flanagan and Lieut. Clarke were actually in the Field Ambulance on the river bank just behind the trenches during the action, and were almost immediately afterwards dispatched to India, and Cap-

(1) Captain F. A. Robinson, R.A.M.C., who had been with the battalion since mobilisation also received the M.C. for his gallantry in this action.

tains Belgrave and Hibbert and Lieut. Piggott had received Staff appointments, the battalion was thus left terribly weak in officers and with under 400 rank and file.

July – Nov
1915
2nd Battalion

However, the victory had been decisive enough; all local opposition ceased, the remnants of the Turkish troops—they had lost over 1,000 prisoners and nearly 20 guns, and many hundreds of dead were found in their trenches—decamped to a respectful distance, and Nasiriya was occupied without further fighting, nor was its garrison destined to be troubled by anything more than stray Arab snipers for some months to come.

Directly the town had been occupied the transfer of troops back to the Tigris line for the advance on Kut was begun. In that advance The Queen's Own was represented only by the few men serving as machine gunners on the flotilla which co-operated with General Townshend's force. _ Some of these distinguished themselves in the battle for Kut, and three, Corpl. Bax and Ptes. Mires and Pannett, earned the D.C.M. for bold and skilful handling of their weapons. (1) But the 12th Brigade was left on the Euphrates and many months were to pass before the battalion saw the last of Nasiriya. Early in August it received a welcome draft of 200 officers and men, volunteers from Territorial battalions in India. These included Lieut. Haslam and 41 men from the 4th R.W.K., and similar detachments from the 5th Battalion under Lieut. Marshall, and from the 5th Buffs and 2/4th and 2/6th Devons. Their arrival brought the battalion's much depleted ranks up to a respectable strength again, and with the improvement in the climate that accompanied the advance of autumn the sick rate declined and a certain number of recovered sick and wounded rejoined. Brig.-Gen. McNab, who had joined the Brigade soon after the fall of, Nasiriya, was invalided after about a month and replaced by Brig.-Gen. H. T. Brooking, till then in command at Bushire. Early in November

(1) Pte. Back also received the D.C.M. for gallantry in this action.

the uneventful course of the battalion's doings was broken by a sudden order for two companies to proceed at once down river to Qurna for employment at Kut al Amara, from which place the Sixth Division had advanced on Baghdad. Nos. II. and IV. Companies accordingly left Nasiriya on November 9th under Major Nelson. (1) There was a general hope that the departure of this detachment was only the prelude to the move of the whole battalion to a more active theatre of operations, twice before it was noted had this happened, but this was not to be, and the end of 1915 found the headquarter wing still at Nasiriya, by which time Major Nelson's detachment was already in its fourth week as part of the closely invested garrison of Kut. A small reinforcement had been received on December 1st consisting of Major Woulfe-Flanagan, Captain Case Morris and 23 men, recovered sick and wounded, but otherwise December had proved quite uneventful. (2)

Nov – Dec
1915
2nd Battalion

(1) Promoted to that rank on Sept. 1st in a promotion which included no less than eleven Captains and went down as far as Captain Lynch-White.

(2) This chapter was already in page-proof before the publication of Volume I. of the official account of the campaign, written by Brig. Gen. F. J. Moberly, which gives an excellent account of the operations in Arabistan and at Nasiriya. It has been impossible, therefore, to utilize it in compiling this narrative.

BATTLE OF NASIRIYAH

July 25th 1915

100 50 0 100 200 yards



THORNYCROFT
CORNER

A-A Line from which
2nd R.W.M. attacked
B-B Line held by 67th
and 90th Punjabis
M and N Fortified Towers
T, T, T, Turkish Trenches

