On the Road to Kut
A Soldier's Story of the Mesopotamian Campaign

WITH 56 ILLUSTRATIONS AND A MAP

LONDON: HUTCHINSON & CO.
PATERNOSTER ROW :: 1917
CHAPTER VI

EARLY in April we began to get very busy, for certain preparations were being made which threw a great deal of work on my corps. To make clear what follows, I must explain that the Turks were gathered in force behind some low hills to the east and south of Shaiba, about ten or fifteen miles from Basra. Between us was a stretch of bog, which in places was deep enough for the flat-bottomed bellums to sail from one side to the other. Across this bog my convoy had to go: one day there and the next day back. Saturdays we rested and cleaned the gear; it needed cleaning, too!

The continuous work began to tell on the mules and also on the men, although the harness perhaps suffered most owing to its being always wet. My boots were almost falling to pieces, and, as if this were not enough, I tore my only decent pair of bags!

Crossing the Shaiba pond, my pony got
bogged in the hinder portions and sat down in the mud with me; my sword touched the ground and was pushed up, so that in dismounting my leg caught in the hilt and rip went my cherished bags! Unluckily it was on the way out, so I had to wear them as they were, sleep in them and return in them. Solomon, however, patched them up and made them look more or less presentable.

At last our preparations were complete and the battle started on Sunday, April 11th, at 3 p.m.; I had just come in from Shaiba when I heard the guns firing. There was a small action that afternoon, the Turks' advance guard attacking our position and then entrenching themselves. During the same night we managed to send one regiment, the Punjabis, across the water direct to Shaiba in bellums poled by another Punjabi regiment. It was unfortunate that these bellums had not been previously commandeered for military purposes; perhaps this was owing to the idea that the mule convoy must continue, whatever happened. In any case, whatever the reason, when bellums were urgently required, there were no bellumchis; hence a regiment unaccustomed to the work had to punt the
boats; also, what might have been more serious, only a minimum of bellums was to be found at a moment's notice.

On Monday, the 12th, further reinforcements sent by boat were attacked in the water by Turkish bellums, and had to return. Hurried preparations were then made for Tuesday, on which day the famous aquatic battle took place on the Shaiba road. During the previous afternoon and night we had joined boats together with platforms, on which were mounted machine guns and mountain guns covered with straw; and early on Tuesday morning a small force issued from Basra, with the intention, not of reinforcing Shaiba, but of clearing our watery lines of communication of the Turkish bellums met with on the previous day. On nearing Shaiba, the Turks, as on the day before, came out to attack what they perhaps thought was reinforcing infantry. I think they got the surprise of their lives! There was about two feet of water and one foot of mud, and the battle was fought in boats on what is usually the Basra-Zobeir cart road.

Orders had been issued that the daily convoy of fifteen hundred mules would continue to proceed across the Shaiba water until the "crack of doom," and this apparently, and most fortunately, sounded on the 11th. On that morning reinforcements of troops had been massed at the Zobeir Gate, Basra, to proceed to Shaiba, both as escort to the convoy and as reinforcements to the garrison there. Obviously no Staff officer present knew the road, as a transport officer was asked to lead the column. The brigade which had previously marched to Shaiba had taken some twelve hours to perform the journey—in fact, its last platoons did not arrive at their destination until nearly midnight, having started at 8 a.m. It was, therefore, reasonable to suppose that a second brigade moving along the same route, with even deeper water on it and more mud, would take a good deal longer to perform the same march, especially as they would probably be under fire during the latter portion of the journey, and somewhat astonishing that valuable time should have been wasted in a futile endeavour to achieve the impossible. However, the brigade did make the attempt, guided, as already stated, by a transport officer, but having gone about three miles, the G.O.C. recognized the
utter hopelessness of the proceedings and returned to camp. I often wonder if his Staff got the benefit of his opinion on his arrival!

The final fight took place in the Barjasiyeh woods, some five miles in a south-westerly direction from Shaiba. The Turks had occupied the first day in shelling our camp, keeping up a furious rifle fire all night, whilst sapping towards our entanglements and trenches. The second day they gave us shell fire, followed by an attempt to force their way in, which was repulsed with such heavy loss that the Turkish commander, according to Turkish officers taken prisoners, determined to employ a ruse and make us believe that he had retired. Hence he withdrew early in the morning to positions prepared by him in Barjasiyeh wood, expecting that we should follow him. We fitted nicely into his schemes and did exactly as we were wanted to; but, as the Turks said, we followed no known law of attack. We advanced when we ought to have halted and dug in. We got to within two hundred yards, when we ought to have halted at a thousand yards; and we charged their trenches when we ought to have sat down opposite them for a week and been beaten by them. Truly, from the configuration of the ground, we ought to have been wiped out long before we reached their trenches. The distance from Shaiba to Barjasiyeh was about five miles; for roughly half of this distance the ground rises very gradually, and then slopes almost imperceptibly downwards to the Turkish trenches. Standing in the Turks’ trenches, one commands a magnificent view of every living thing, whether coming over the sky-line or occupying any spot on the bare slope beneath. It was undoubtedly a chosen position, and with everything in favour of the defenders of the trenches, hidden as they were, not only by the nature of the ground, but by the feathery growth of a large number of tamarisk bushes forming the Barjasiyeh wood. The Turks alone had a force superior in numbers to the British, and they had also a large number—estimated at about fifteen thousand—of irregular Arab horsemen. These latter could have helped to win the day, but they never moved a finger; altogether they were more of a nuisance than a help to the Turks during the operations, and a horrible affliction when the
day went against them, for they harried their former allies for nearly a hundred miles.

To return to the battle, and the reason why the Turks were driven out when by all laws of war they ought not to have been, I have heard it whispered that we unintentionally took the wrong direction, and arrived much too near to one flank. Then followed a re-shuffling, during which our guns were giving the Turks a tremendous hammering. And then, just as everyone was wondering what was to be done, the Jaipur transport carts appeared over the horizon, under orders to pick up the wounded preparatory to retirement. The Turks saw them, thought they were more guns, and wavered, whereupon the order to charge was given. The cavalry brigade went right through them, and they fled precipitately. Our troops had had a hard fight, and could not follow up their advantage, but the Arabs did this most effectually, whilst our men returned to their camp at Shaiba, reaching there about 8 p.m., very pleased with the success of their first big fight against heavy odds.

The following day the cavalry were sent out and got as far as the Turkish camp at Naikhalo, which they found evacuated and looted by the Arabs; but at Barjasieh they found the Turkish camp still standing almost untouched, with the men's kits laid out as for kit inspection.

I am afraid that in this battle our casualties were heavy, I believe about eight hundred, including eleven officers killed and fifty wounded. The Turks must have lost a large number in killed and wounded, besides about a thousand prisoners, some of whom came in afterwards and were photographed on route by me.

Meanwhile the enemy's lines of communication along the river Euphrates had been harried by a force of river gunboats manned by men of the Navy and of the Royal Artillery. Owing to the nature of the river these operations were exceedingly difficult, but were most successful, many barges and mehelas full of grain and stores being both sunk and captured. The commander of the Turks, Suliman Askari, is said to have shot himself at Naikhalo after this, for him, disastrous encounter.

At the same time that the Turks delivered their determined but unsuccessful attack on
Shaiba, culminating in their defeat at Barjasiyeh, they delivered simultaneous but weak and half-hearted attacks on both Kurna and Ahwaz. Knowing of the existence of Turkish forces at these places, we had no choice but to advance against them; as, in addition to the standing menace of enemy forces perhaps receiving reinforcements so close to the key of the Shatt-el-Arab on the one hand, and the oil pipe-line on the other, there was the further danger of the many Arab tribes who were still sitting on the fence joining in with the Turks, and so becoming a formidable enemy. It is a well-known trait of Semitic nations that they believe most sincerely in the power of the mailed fist. Hence, if one power makes a show of force which is unresisted by its opponent, the Arab mind jumps to the not always correct conclusion that the non-opposition is caused primarily by fear of the result. Consequently a force of Turks not opposed would, in all probability, have gathered to itself a multitude of desert Arabs expectant of loot, but always ready to turn on their temporary allies should they be defeated. It was, therefore, to our advantage to strike quickly and

strike as hard as possible at these two forces after the rout of the Turks at Shaiba, and General Townshend organized a force to attack Kurna, whilst General Gorringe began to march against the Turks operating near Ahwaz.

The Turkish troops who retreated from Shaiba were said to have reached Nasriyeh, where they were probably reorganizing; but they would not be available for reinforcing the army in front of Kurna for some time, partly owing to disorganization following on a rout, and partly on account of the flooded nature of the country, which would have necessitated either a large number of boats and a command of the river which they had not got; or a long march via the Shatt-el-Hai and Amara. Even this route meant the crossing of the Euphrates, the navigation of the Hai, and the carrying of supplies in boats; all of which were practically impossible for a force of any size. It also meant the surrendering of the Euphrates line by the Turks, which was unthinkable, considering the richness of the country, the possibility of our advance on Baghdad along this route—it is the line chosen for the Baghdad railway—and the political effect on the Arabs by the
Turks' desertion of the holy places Kerbela, Babylon, etc.

After the battle my corps had a pretty stiff time for a few days clearing up things and moving people about, and the whole transport was nearly worked off its legs. A steady rain for two days did nothing to lessen our difficulties; the roads became simply awful, and some of the camels had a very bad time, slithering about all over the place and doing about a quarter of a mile in three hours. At last we had to push them into odd places on the side of the road, to wait till the rain stopped and the mud dried up a little. One evening I was nearly four hours fixing them up. Two fell down and so injured themselves that I was obliged to shoot them (their legs fly apart in the slippery mud, and the poor creatures literally split in half). After shooting them, we had to get them out of the way, as they blocked up the path; and I have most unpleasant recollections of a crush of troops, infantry, cavalry, artillery, animals and everything else, trying to struggle along a slippery ten-foot road, everybody and everything sliding and no lights! Really it was a Bedlam.

CHAPTER VII

The rain cleared off, and up till the end of April it was, comparatively speaking, cool, very different from the end of April in India. At Basra it was certainly uncomfortable at midday, but the nights, especially if there happened to be a breeze, were perfectly delightful. We were told that May would be H-O-T-warm, but that June and July are always cool, owing to the Shumai, or north-west wind, which is so refreshing that the Arabs call it "The Blessing."

General Barrett went sick and left for home, and General Nixon took over the command with a brand new outfit of Generals and Staff. The number of frogs was extraordinary, and the ground was simply crawling with crabs, the little green sort found at the seaside, looking awfully like scorpions as they ran over the road.
three months' treatment, and one of my men had a dreadful hand and arm; from elbow to knuckles it looked as if someone had taken some peculiar instrument and systematically bored round saucer-shaped holes an eighth of an inch deep, wherever he could find room.

CHAPTER XII

As to what was meantime happening up the river, the success or failure of General Townshend's expedition and the doings of our forces, we had only a very vague idea. Our first authentic news came from the Pioneer, in which we read that a battle had taken place near Ctesiphon. It seemed to us almost incredible that the advance force, with its limited transport arrangements, could have reached so far that it was really within thirty miles of Baghdad; but as more news gradually filtered through, the Pioneer was proved to be right.

The account of the battle as published was somewhat puzzling. First we had the announcement by Mr. Asquith in the House on November 2nd: "The force in Mesopotamia is within measurable distance of Baghdad." This announcement and the eulogy contained in the words, "I do not think that in the whole course of the war
there has been a series of operations more carefully contrived, more brilliantly conducted, and with better prospect of final success," were received by all with the deepest satisfaction. It was good to know that Baghdad had at last been officially stated to be our goal, although rumour had pronounced it to be such for nearly a year. Pride in our own little force, which had achieved so much that had been ignored in the English papers, and a feeling of gratitude to the Prime Minister that he had at last caused our labours and trials to be acknowledged to the world, found expression everywhere.

Following this most pleasing announcement came the memorable telegram that the British had won a brilliant victory over the Turks at Ctesiphon, capturing sixteen hundred prisoners and several guns. This was, however, quickly succeeded by another telegram, informing us all that owing to want of water, etc., the troops were unable to hold the position captured; also, that our casualties were heavy, and that General Townshend had withdrawn his force to a position lower down the river. Of course, it was easy to read between the lines, and no one was deceived into believing anything but that we had what is commonly termed "taken it in the neck," and were retiring as fast as our limited transport would permit.

Before describing the battle and the events which quickly followed it, I will endeavour to give some idea of the place and its surroundings, so that the position may be more clearly understood.

Ctesiphon, although not of great antiquity, has had a glorious past. It stands opposite the ruins of the historically more interesting town of Seleucia, which was founded by the Greeks and was the capital of the Tigris colony in the time of Alexander the Great. This immense city, built by Seleucus Nicator, had already captured the whole of the local commerce before Ctesiphon was built, and is generally considered to have caused the downfall of Babylon.

The city of Ctesiphon owed its foundation to Varanes, but the palace and great hall were built by Chosroes. They used to be known as the Takht-i-Khesra (throne of Chosroes), but the local name is now Suliman Pak, as it is the burial-place of this celebrity, once the barber of Mohammed.
The glory of the place was the great hall, eighty-five feet high and seventy-two feet wide, the roof of which was decorated by the signs of the Zodiac in golden stars, whilst the entrance to the palace was ornamented by twelve wonderful marble pillars.

At the commencement of the Mohammedan era, when the Jehad was proclaimed and Arab hordes under Sa'ad marched forth to spread Islam by means of the sword, Ctesiphon and Seleucia were among the first places to which the fanatics turned their attention. Seleucia resisted their onslaughts for many months, but had to be abandoned on account of want of provisions, the Persian garrison crossing the river to Ctesiphon and taking with them all their boats and coracles. As the Arabs had no boats, and the river was swift and deep, the Persians thought they were safe, but that ever-present villain of the East, the traitor, led the Arabs across a ford. The Persians, surprised and terrified, fled, leaving the two cities and much wealth in the hands of the Arabs. Ctesiphon having been the king's palace and capital of the Persian Empire, the whole of the royal jewels were lost. This was compensated for in later years by the looting of the Peacock Throne at Delhi by Nadir Shah. The great hall was turned into a mosque by the conquerors, and remained so for about a hundred years, whilst the palace became the seat of the Khalifate.

Ctesiphon, owing to its position on the river, had never prospered; it was originally intended by the Persian conquerors to take the place of the old Greek city Seleucia, but in this it failed, as people would not live there. The city's history, in fact, suggests the story of Fatehpur Sikri nearly a thousand years later. The Arab victors launched it on another career under the most favourable auspices; but again Destiny was against it, for within a hundred years of its conversion into a mosque Baghdad was chosen as a better site for the capital of Islam. Ctesiphon fell into decay, and its stones were transported to build the new city. The arch itself was found to be impossible to destroy and still remains a monument to its own imperial greatness. It will thus be seen how much Baghdad and Ctesiphon have in common, and what traditions the place held for the defenders.

We must not forget also that it was near here, in about 400 B.C., that Cyrus, the
Persian King, fought his great battle against Artaxerxes (Memnon) for the throne of Babylon. Cyrus was killed, his Persian and other followers either fled or deserted, leaving that historical hero Xenophon and ten thousand Greek soldiers who were in the pay of Cyrus, to fight their way back to Macedonia. The march of the Ten Thousand, commencing near Ctesiphon and ending in the vicinity of Trebizond on the Black Sea, has always been considered one of the most marvellous feats of arms the world has ever known; but, glorious as their march undoubtedly was, yet we must remember that this was probably the first recorded result of a conflict of West versus East in the Tigris Valley in which the West had not been victorious.

To resume the story of our advance and the final retirement to Kut: Almost immediately after the capture of Kut-el-Amara, on September 28th, 1915, it was decided to push on to Baghdad, ninety miles by road, and on the 21st of November the British force arrived at Lajj, on the left bank of the Tigris, about ten miles south-east of Ctesiphon and thirty miles from Baghdad. The troops had marched up both banks of the river, followed by a slow-moving flotilla of armed launches, monitors, paddle-boats, barges and mahelas, which, proceeding up stream, could only creep at a snail’s pace round the long curves of the river’s course, the journey by river being nearly three times as long as that by road.

At Lajj it was found that the Turks had again taken up their position astride the river, almost exactly as at Kut, with the greater part of their force on the norin bank. Nur-ed-Din was again in command, and information was to the effect that he had thirteen thousand regulars, thirty-eight guns, a large mass of Arabs, and was expecting heavy reinforcements shortly. It was obviously important that this force should be defeated before the arrival of reinforcements, and with this end in view General Townshend attacked the Turkish trenches in the early morning of November 22nd. As stated, these trenches were astride the river, the first position being about two miles east of the arch of Chosroes’ palace and the second position parallel to it about three miles west of the ruins. The trenches faced at right angles to the river’s course, approximately south-
east, and were each about nine miles in extent!

The auspices, therefore, under which the battle of Ctesiphon was fought were not favourable. On the 22nd of November, 1915, General Townshend attacked the Turkish left on very much the same plan as was followed by him at the battle of Kut-el-Amara, with the exception that his own right flank was protected by a Cavalry Brigade flung far out. The front line of Turkish trenches was quickly taken, the Turkish division holding that particular portion of trench being almost wiped out or captured. Our troops pushed across the interval between the first and second line trenches under a heavy fire from the Turkish guns and rifles, and here a fierce struggle ensued, ending in the capture of a portion of the Turkish second line. The enemy, however, brought up reinforcements, and delivered several determined counter-attacks, which our men, in spite of indomitable courage, were unable to withstand. Several Turkish guns had been captured at the first onslaught on the second line, and these changed owners many times, finally remaining in the hands of the Turks when at nightfall, owing to shortage of ammunition and water, we were obliged to retire to the line of trenches we had first taken. During the night the Turks showed great activity. The second day, November 23rd, was occupied by us in removing wounded and prisoners, and in consolidating the position won. The following night was spent by the Turks in fruitless attempts to turn us out of our position, each attempt costing them heavy casualties, as they attacked in mass.

The day and night of November 24th, the third day of the battle, our troops were too exhausted by want of rest and heavy fighting to do anything more than continue to remove their prisoners and wounded. Thus matters stood until the afternoon of the fourth day, November 25th, when further large reinforcements of Turkish regulars (probably from the Dardanelles), amounting, it appeared, to four divisions with cavalry, were seen to be moving down, threatening to envelop both our flanks.

With prisoners numbering over sixteen hundred and some three thousand wounded, the position for the British commander was a dangerous one. Accordingly, on the night
of the fourth day, November 25th, the Turkish trenches were evacuated, and the British force retired to its camp at Lajj, where it remained during the fifth day, November 26th, and the same night. It was obviously impossible to hold Lajj, as no reinforcements were near; moreover, the line of communications was lengthy and most vulnerable. Therefore, on the sixth day, November 27th, the inevitable retirement began, and the force reached Umm-el-Tubal, about half-way to Kut, on November 30th.

The retirement had not been without incident, for on the 28th the Sheitan grounded near Aziziye, and on the 29th a halt was called owing to some of the other shipping having got into difficulties. The Sheitan I knew quite well; she had done most excellent work in the past, but her career ended, and her guns were transferred to the Shusan and Firefly, one a stern-wheeler and the other a small monitor.

This attempt to re-float the shipping occupied up to the evening of the 30th, during the night of which the main Turkish force came in touch with our tired troops. The following day (the eleventh day, December 1st) the Turks attacked, but lost so heavily that General Townshend was able to break off the action and continue his retreat.

Meanwhile the flotilla on the river was having serious trouble with the numerous sandbanks and shoals caused by the very low state of the water. The Firefly and the Comet both grounded and had to be abandoned. All ranks must have regretted the Comet, which had been foremost in every action that had taken place since the commencement of the campaign.

Continuing the retirement throughout the 2nd of December, the forces reached Kut on December 3rd, the thirteenth day from the beginning of the battle of Ctesiphon. Their losses had been over four thousand five hundred men, also the Firefly, Comet and Sheitan. The Turkish losses were presumed to have been far heavier, sixteen hundred and fifty prisoners alone having been taken into Kut by our troops.

The days between December 3rd and 6th were occupied in sending off wounded and prisoners; the cavalry were dispatched to Ali-al-Gharbi, and all boats and vessels that were not absolutely necessary were sent down
stream. During this period General Nixon himself and his staff narrowly escaped capture by Arabs, he having been at Kut during the retirement.

On the evening of December 6th Kut was completely invested by the Turkish forces.

This, then, was the news for which we had waited so long and so anxiously! The expedition to Baghdad is typical of English methods in warfare; it seems to be one of the national characteristics to believe that an empire can be taken by a corporal's guard. I wonder how it was proposed to hold Baghdad if taken! Still, the attempt shows the right spirit, and the troops proved themselves magnificent. But in what campaign in history should we find a small force launched nearly five hundred miles from its base with practically no troops whatever to support it? One would have expected that in Kut at least they would have had large reinforcements available in case of a reverse, and, if not at Kut, most assuredly at Amara.

There were rumours that several divisions were then on their way, but they arrived, unfortunately, too late for the critical moment. The time was fast approaching when the
whole of the Euphrates and Tigris valley would be under water, and Kut would, on that account, be difficult to relieve. Those of us who had already been through a rainy season realized that troublous times were ahead for everyone; and, knowing the obstacles to be encountered when endeavouring to accumulate stores at any great distance from the base, we could not help wondering how many days’ supplies had been collected in Kut prior to its investment!
CHAPTER XIX

We arrived at Basra on Good Friday after a very quick and pleasant journey down the river Karun in a stern-wheeler, and up the Shatt-el-Arab from Mohammerah in a Richmond-to-Windsor penny steamer; it felt almost like being on the Thames again. I found the town considerably changed since I had last seen it, and an entirely different place from the Basra at which I had first landed in November, 1914. The river was full of craft, and reminded me of Southampton Water, with its masses of shipping. On the banks and quays were acres and acres of stores, equipment and the necessary machinery to maintain so large a force as was by that time gathered in the district. After the primitive surroundings we had left behind us, it was all a little bewildering, and one could not help wondering when, or if, such an immense quantity of material would be used up.

There were changes everywhere, and all

for the better; it was, indeed, grateful and comforting to find that the Mesopotamian campaign was at last being fully supplied with the materials of war. The swamp once occupied by my corps had become the site of a huge wireless station, the third which had been erected on the same spot since I left. The first, I was told, had been improvised from a couple of old masts; the second, a good deal larger, was of the umbrella type, and the third and last had evidently been constructed as a permanent and powerful station from which news could be received from Malta or even from the Eiffel Tower.

The main topic of conversation, and, in fact, the only subject to which any of us gave any thought at all, was the condition of the beleaguered force in Kut and the attempts which had been made to relieve it. The full description of every battle which was fought during that anxious three and a half months in repeated efforts to force the Turks from various positions, requires more accurate knowledge than I was able to obtain on the spot; but perhaps a synopsis of events and the accounts given me by eye-witnesses may be interesting.
I will therefore set down quite briefly the actions fought, with their various dates and approximate results:

January 6th, 7th, 8th: Capture of Sheikh Saad.
January 18th, 14th: Capture of Wadi on the right bank of the Tigris.
January 20th, 21st: Attack on Hanna on the left bank.
March 8th: Attack on Dujailah redoubt.
April 5th: Capture of Hanna.
April 5th: Capture of Ab-ul-Rahman.
April 5th (night): Capture of Falahiyyah.
April 6th: Attack on Sannaiyat.
April 8th, 9th: Second attack on Sannaiyat.
April 12th: Capture of outpost line of Beit Aiessa.
April 15th, 16th, 17th: Attack and capture of Beit Aiessa.
April 17th (night): Further attack (repulsed).
April 20th, 21st: Bombardment of Sannaiyat.
April 22nd: Unsuccessful attack to force Sannaiyat.
April 24th: Dispatch of food-ship Julnar.

I must here mention that between the 6th of December, when Kut was invested, and the 6th of January, when the relieving force fought the action at Sheikh Saad, there had been several attempts by the Turks to take Kut-el-Amara by assault, notably on December 10th and 11th, when the Turks suffered very heavy losses. On the night of the 17th of December the British attacked the Turks, and the Turks assaulted Kut again on December 26th.

Meanwhile troops had been hurrying out from France. On arrival in Basra they were pushed up stream, both by boat and by road, as fast as supplies could be brought up after them, their concentrating point being Ali-al-Gharbi. Owing to the unavoidable disorganization of units during the embarkation, sea voyage, and their arrival in a further state of disorganization caused by the pace of vessels at sea, the — Division, which arrived first at Ali-al-Gharbi, was wanting in many essentials, principally cohesion. Nevertheless, they advanced and took Sheikh Saad and Wadi on the right bank after two severe actions, when it was necessary to reorganize them.

But time was precious, and it was believed
that the supplies in Kut were far more limited than was actually the case. Hence this Division was again thrown against the Turks at Hanna, where it suffered heavy losses, the weather being execrable. After the attack on the Hanna position, the —— Division was so depleted by casualties and so disorganized, that a rest to re-coup and re-form battalions was necessary; and as another Division had commenced to arrive shortly after the attack, it was apparently decided to await the assembling of the new Division before commencing further operations.

The month of February was spent in preparation for another attack, information having been received from General Townshend that he had eighty-four days’ supplies in hand, not counting three thousand mules.

On the 7th of March dispositions were made for a night march on the Dujailah redoubt, some fifteen miles from the British position. This redoubt had been the most southerly point of the Turkish trenches, and was open up to the beginning of March to a turning movement from the south. Between March 1st and 8th the Turks had continued this line, digging a trench from Dujailah in a south-westerly direction as far as the Shatt-el-Hai. The attack on this redoubt was to have been performed by two strong columns, the plan being that part of one Division should attack from the east and part of another Division from the south.

The dispositions for the night march were most successful, and are recognized by all as a piece of brilliant Staff work. The eastern force was in position at daybreak, but the southern was an hour behind time. According to all eye-witnesses the Turkish trenches were empty, and had we gone straight on, even after the late arrival of the southern column, the consensus of opinion is that Dujailah could have been taken almost without a shot having been fired. But individual initiative is not encouraged in the British Army; orders appear to have been given to the effect that no assault on the Dujailah redoubt was to take place until after effective artillery preparation. The guns were therefore ordered to open fire, and three hours were lost whilst they registered and carried out their instructions. The Turks, meanwhile, had discovered the situation, and reinforcements had been hurriedly pushed up the communication trenches. Thus, when our
troops attacked the redoubt four hours after the arrival of the first column, they were met by an extremely strong opposition—made doubly strong by the nature of the ground, and the clever manner in which the enemy trenches were so concealed amongst the scrub as to be invisible until within a few yards. Further reinforcements reached the Turks during the day, and they several times counter-attacked us; our own troops being practically pinned to the desert without any sort of cover.

On the southern face an attempt was made about midday which got up to within five hundred yards of the enemy’s position, and a further attempt in the evening got within two hundred yards, but was again repulsed. Only five miles away the palm-trees of Kut could be seen standing up against the rising sun as the last force made their retreat, and the defenders of the gallant little garrison must have been anxious spectators of the fight, which, if successful, would give them their freedom. However, in spite of heroic and persistent efforts, the Relief Force could make no further headway; want of water decided the situation, and our troops were back again in Wadi on the night of March 9th.

The remainder of the month was taken up in a struggle against mud and flood, and with the arrival and assembling of another Division. In spite of our reinforcements, the numerical strength of the two forces was still about equal, as the Turks had also been joined by fresh units; moreover, the front over which we could attack had been further restricted by floods and the consequent rising of the Suwalkieh marsh.

April opened wet, but in spite of this most serious obstacle, a Division attacked Hanna on the 5th of April and captured it. The position was by no means held in such force as it had been when the first attack was launched on it on the 20th and 21st of January, and, after artillery preparation, Falahiyah was assaulted and taken the same night. Meanwhile a force had captured Ab-ul-Rahman on the right bank. The position, owing to the rise in the river and the possibility of the Turks cutting the river bunds and thus flooding the country, was still precarious; hence an immediate attack on Sannaiyat was decided upon, and was carried out at dawn on April 6th.

A force passed through during the night, their orders being to keep their direction by an old
ON THE ROAD TO KUT

Turkish communication trench running from Falahiyah to Sannaiyat on their left, and to be in position before daybreak. But during the darkness the direction was mistaken, and the many deep trenches so delayed them that daybreak found them still a mile and a half from the Turkish trenches. They were, of course, discovered, but with great gallantry, in the face of machine-gun, rifle and artillery fire, they continued their advance until their losses compelled them to retire and dig in at a thousand yards from the Turks.

That night, the night of April 6th, weather conditions for the division reached, as its members say, the limit of all things. The wind blew the waters of the marsh over their right flank, and they were obliged to construct bunds to keep out the marsh on the right and the river on their left under a heavy fire from the Turks. Guns got bogged and isolated in the water, and everyone was reduced to desperation. Meanwhile the force on the opposite bank, at Ab-ul-Rahman, was almost surrounded by water.

During this period of bad weather another bridge had been under construction, and this was completed by the evening of April 8th at Falahiyah, close behind our positions on the two banks. The possession of Sannaiyat being the key not only to Kut, but to the control of the floods on the left bank, it was essential to dislodge the Turks as soon as possible. A fresh assault was, therefore, determined upon and carried out on the night of April 8th. Again the attack failed, and again all accounts of the action are not without variation as to the cause of failure.

It appears that the first line reached to within three hundred yards of the enemy trenches before they were discovered; they were then subjected to a terrible fire from machine-guns and rifles, whilst lit up by the flare of Very lights and other illuminative devices used by the Turks. Nevertheless, they reached and entered the Turkish trenches.

The second line, however, failed to arrive in support; apparently they lost their direction (though the Turkish lights should have shown them the way one would have thought), and fell back on the third and fourth line; with the result that when the Turks counter-attacked, our first line were too weak to hold them and were ejected from the positions they had won, eventually digging...
in at a distance of five hundred yards from their objective.

The restricted front between marsh and river on the left bank, also the two costly and unsuccessful attempts to force Sannaiyat, were apparently deciding factors against another immediate attempt at taking this position. Accordingly, a force was directed to commence operations against Beit Aiessa on the 12th of April, with a view to subsequently attacking the Sinn Aftar redoubt, a strong natural position held by the Turks some five miles east of Kut. This point the Turks had been obliged to vacate some months earlier when the 6th Division, under General Townshend had enveloped their left and gained such a signal victory over them at the taking of Kut-el-Amara; but it had since been occupied by the enemy.

The preliminary movements against Beit Aiessa from Ab-ul-Rahman were made through swamps, mud and deep water-cuts, and culminated in the capture of part of the Turkish outlying trenches on April 16th. After consolidating the positions won, the guns were moved forward, and on the early morning of the 17th a brilliant attack on Beit Aiessa ended with the capture of that important position.

During these operations it was decided apparently that a force should make the final attack on Sinn Aftar, consequently, on the night of April 17th this force commenced crossing the river by the bridge at Falahiyah, whilst another Division got ready to concentrate on the left rear as soon as they had taken over the line, so as to be ready for the assault on Sinn Aftar on the morning of April 18th.

The Turks, however, had evidently guessed our intentions, and commenced a bombardment of Beit Aiessa on the evening of April 17th, almost before the force had commenced to cross the river. A barrage was established to prevent reinforcements or supplies reaching them, and about an hour later, at 6 p.m., a very strong attack was launched against our left. A double company guarding two captured guns bore the first onslaught, but were obliged to retire, unfortunately masking the fire of the regiments in the vicinity whilst carrying out this operation. The
immediate result was that a brigade on the left had to give ground, exposing the front of another brigade, which also had to withdraw a short distance. As a consequence of these retirements the line assumed a V shape, with the apex towards the Turks. Continuous attacks were made throughout the night by the Turkish forces, which greatly outnumbered the British, and the apex of the line was several times the scene of the most desperate struggles. Hand-to-hand fighting went on practically all night, the Turks attacking in mass formations, and repeatedly attempting to overwhelm them.

One mountain battery was in the thick of it, firing point-blank into the masses of the enemy and doing terrific execution, while at the same time carrying on a hand-to-hand conflict with those Turks who had managed to escape the fire from the guns.

Reinforcements eventually arrived towards morning, having been very much delayed by the swamps, bogs and darkness; and the Turks withdrew at daylight, having suffered enormous losses, estimated at about five thousand men. Their efforts had not been wholly
ON THE ROAD TO KUT

unsuccessful, for that portion of the position nearest the river, and therefore controlling the river bund, remained in their hands. The withdrawal of their main body, moreover, was a model of precision and showed the hallmark of German discipline.

Our further attack on Sinn Aftar redoubt had to be postponed until the recapture of Beit Aiessa. Owing to the impossibility of digging and the exhaustion of the troops employed, practically no progress was made, with the exception of a few saps towards Sinn Aftar.

Meanwhile the force in front of Sannaiyat on the left bank had been steadily digging towards the enemy lines; and possibly because it was thought that men had been withdrawn from the Turkish trenches to reinforce the right bank, thus weakening the probable opposition at Sannaiyat, an assault was ordered again on the morning of the 20th April. But on the 19th there was a strong gale from the north, and, as was the case on the night of the 6th of April, the water from the Suwaikieh marsh was blown into the trenches; with the result that for the second time the Division battled
with the elements and the pending attack was postponed.

The following two days were occupied in a bombardment of the Turkish position, and arrangements were made for an attack on the morning of the 22nd. Owing to the storm of the preceding days, the enemy front had been reduced to less than a quarter of a mile in length. There were several lines of trenches, all held by a determined enemy amply supplied with machine-guns and ammunition. There were no possible means of carrying out anything but a frontal attack, which, under conditions such as now presented themselves, is usually considered very costly in men, if not impossible of accomplishment. However, to reduce in part the difficulties of a frontal attack, massed machine-guns were placed on the right bank, where they could enfilade the Turkish trenches at Sannaiyat, whilst every available gun on the right bank bombarded the enemy's positions.

The attack was launched in spite of the heaviness of the ground, which two days before had been covered with several inches of water. The first Turkish trench was occupied; the second line of trenches was a dyke with five feet of water in it; beyond this again were remains of Turkish pits, dug-outs and trenches, all full of water, whilst the mud between the second and third Turkish lines was over the tops of the men's boots. It was impossible to advance over this quagmire at more than a slow walk; and this the gallant regiments endeavoured to do in face of a terrific fire from the Turkish third line. The attack, in spite of these physical difficulties, might have reached the Turkish trenches had our men been able to reply to the enemy's fire; but every man had fallen down, the whole division was floundering in mud and water, rifles were choked up with mud, and the men could not open and close the breeches of their rifles. They even went to the length of trying to suck the mud off the breeches, but all their heroism was in vain; the Turks at this critical moment were heavily reinforced, and strong counter-attacks forced our men to retire before reaching their goal. Highlanders and Punjabis had vied with one another in heroism, and never was more gallant effort unsuccessful.

This attack on Sannaiyat was considered
the bloodiest battle in the series of operations for the relief of Kut. The casualties on both sides were so heavy that a truce was called, under which the Red Cross and Red Crescent parties collected the killed and wounded on either side.

CHAPTER XX

THE last act in this Eastern tragedy was the fateful voyage of the Julnar, perhaps the most courageous and daring undertaking performed either collectively or individually in the whole history of the Relief Force, as it was also the culminating disaster. The gallant 6th Division had held out, hoping against hope for five months, and every attempt to provision the garrison had failed. The Flying Corps had made daily attempts to relieve the food question by dropping into Kut supplies, money and much-needed medicines, also fishing nets, with which it was hoped they might be able to augment their supplies from the river. But the number of aeroplanes available was too small and the strain on the pilots was too great to keep up a constant service; moreover, the danger of the proceeding increased daily, as the Turks were on the look-out for aircraft attempting the journey to Kut, and had, in fact, shot down one of our machines.
It had become obvious that Kut could neither be relieved by the Tigris force, nor materially assisted by the Air Service, and that only a few days remained before the supplies of the garrison would be exhausted and their surrender inevitable. Volunteers were therefore called for from the Royal Navy to run the Turkish blockade and force a boatload of stores up the river. Needless to say, the response was magnificent. On the night of the 29th of April the Julnar, under the command of Lieutenant H. O. B. Firmin, R.N., having been previously provisioned at Amara, attempted the hazardous passage. She was the fastest boat on the river, and it was hoped that, assisted by fire from every available gun to draw the attention of the enemy, she might succeed in reaching her destination. But unfortunately the arrangements for her dispatch were not conducted with sufficient secrecy, or possibly it was the exaggerated attempts at secrecy which were her undoing; at all events, her movements appear to have been known by all and sundry many days before her departure, and there can be no doubt that the Turkish Intelligence Staff combined with Headquarters to frustrate her mission. She started at 8 p.m., and was due in Kut about midnight, or before; the garrison there had been informed of what was being attempted, and one can only faintly imagine the agonizing strain of those waiting hours! At one in the morning a wireless message was received from General Townshend that she had not then arrived, and that gunfire had been heard in the direction of Magasis, eight miles down the river. It was then feared that, owing to the floods and the strong current running, the Julnar must have missed the channel, and that in rounding the Magasis peninsula she had run on a sand-bank. From Turkish reports afterwards received, it transpired that this, more or less, was actually what had happened. The commander had been killed while running the gauntlet of the Turkish guns, his second-in-command, Lieutenant C. H. Cowley, R.N.V.R., had also fallen, and the ship, losing its direction, had drifted on to a sand-bank, where it became a good target for the enemy’s fire. These two officers were awarded posthumous V.C.’s in January, 1917, for their very gallant action, and never were honours more richly deserved.
From that moment Kut was doomed. The next day General Townshend opened negotiations for the surrender of the garrison, and capitulated without any delay to the Turkish commander, Major-General Khalil Pasha. For several days afterwards there was an armistice, during which the more seriously wounded and sick of the Kut garrison were sent over to our lines in exchange for an equal number of Turkish (not Arab) prisoners.

So ended the Siege of Kut, and with it the history of the 6th Division, to which I am so proud to have belonged. Had it not been for a turn of Fortune's wheel I should myself also be "Somewhere in Turkey," together with those dear fellows who have struggled so long and so bravely against overwhelming odds. Many a weary hour I have spent cursing the luck that had laid me low when the first advance took place, and bemoaning my enforced inaction while the rest were doing so much; but, at any rate, I am still able to carry on, and I suppose one ought to be thankful for small mercies.

The career of the division, ending as it did with the battle of Ctesiphon, within nineteen miles of Baghdad, against overwhelming odds, its retreat therefrom over ninety miles of desert with its wounded and many prisoners, followed by an unparalleled siege of five months, constitutes one of the most glorious pages in Britain's history.

The time has not yet come, perhaps, to tell the whole story of Kut, but a few extracts from the orders issued by General Townshend to his troops during those tragic days may be of interest.

_Kut-el-Amara,_
_26th January, 1916._

**COMMUNIQUÉ TO THE TROOPS.**

The relieving force under General Aylmer has been unsuccessful in its efforts to dislodge the Turks entrenched on the left bank of the river some fourteen miles below the position at Es Sinn, where we defeated them in September last, when the Turkish strength was greater than it is now. Our relieving force suffered severe loss, and had very bad weather to contend against; they are entrenched close to the Turkish position.
More reinforcements are on the way up river, and I confidently expect to be relieved some day during the first half of the month of February.

I desire all ranks to know why I decided to make a stand at Kut during our retirement from Ctesiphon. It was because as long as we hold Kut the Turks cannot get their ships, barges, stores and ammunition past this place, and so cannot move down to attack Amara, and thus we are holding up the whole of the Turkish advance. It also gives time for our reinforcements to come up river from Basra, and so restore success to our arms; it gives time to our Allies the Russians, who are now overrunning Persia, to move towards Baghdad, which a large force is now doing. I had a personal message from General Baratoff, in the command of the Russian Expeditionary Force in Persia, the other day, telling me of his admiration of what you men of the 6th Division and the troops attached have done in the past few months, and telling me of his own progress on the road from Kirman-Shah towards Baghdad.

By standing at Kut I maintain the territory we have won in the past year at the expense of much blood, commencing with your glorious victory at Shaiba, and thus we maintain the campaign as a glorious one, instead of letting disaster pursue its course down to Amara and perhaps beyond.

I have ample food for eighty-four days, and that is not counting the three thousand animals which can be eaten. When I defended Chitral some twenty years ago, we lived well on alta and horseflesh; but, as I repeat above, I expect confidently to be relieved in the first half of the month of February.

Our duty stands out plain and simple—it is our duty to our Empire, to our beloved King and country, to stand here and hold up the Turkish advance as we are doing now, and with the help of all, heart and soul with me, together we will make this defence to be remembered in history as a glorious one. All in India and England are watching us now, and are proud of the splendid courage you have shown, and I tell you, let all remember the glorious defence of Plevna—for that is what is in my mind.
I am absolutely calm and confident as to the result; the Turk, though good behind a trench, is of little value in the attack; they have tried it once, and their losses in one night in their attempt on the fort were two thousand alone; they have already had very heavy losses from General Aylmer's musketry and guns, and I have no doubt they have had enough. . . . I did my duty. You know the result and whether I did right or not, and your name will go down to history as the heroes of Ctesiphon, for heroes you proved yourselves in that battle. I perhaps by right should not have told you of the above, but I feel I owe it to you—all of you—to speak straight and openly and take you into my confidence: for God knows, I felt our heavy losses and the sufferings of my poor brave wounded, and shall remember it as long as I live, and I may truly say that no General I know of has been more loyally obeyed and served than I have been in command of the 6th Division.

These words are long, I am afraid, but I speak straight from the heart, and you will see that I have thrown all officialdom overboard. We will succeed, mark my words, but save your ammunition as if it were gold.

(Signed) CHARLES TOWNSHEND,
Major-General,
Commanding 6th Division.

COMMUNIQUE TO THE TROOPS AT KUT.

As on a former occasion, I take the troops of all ranks into my confidence again. . . . Since the 5th of December, 1915, you have spent three months of cruel uncertainty, and to all men and all people uncertainty is intolerable—as I say, on the top of all this comes the second failure to relieve us. And I ask you to give a little sympathy to me also who have commanded you in those matters referred to, and who, having come to you as a stranger, now love my command with a depth of feeling I have never known in my life before. When I mention myself, I would couple the names of the Generals under me, whose names are distinguished in the Army as leaders of men.

I am speaking to you as I did before, straight from the heart, and, as I say, ask your sympathy for my feelings, having
promised you relief on certain dates on the
promise of those ordered to relieve us—not
their fault, no doubt. Do not think I blame
them; they are giving their lives freely and
deserve our gratitude and admiration.

But I want you to help me again as
before. I have asked General Aylmer for
the next attempt, to bring such numbers as
will break down all resistance and leave no
doubt of the issue.

In order, then, to hold out, I am killing a
large number of horses, so as to reduce the
quantity of grain eaten every day, and I
have had to reduce your ration. It is neces-
sary to do this in order to keep our flag
flying. I am determined to hold out, and
I know you are with me in this, heart and
soul.

(Signed) CHARLES TOWNSHEND,
Major-General,
Commanding the Garrison at Kut.

*Kut-el-Amara,
10th March, 1916.

COMMUNIQUE TO THE TROOPS, BRITISH AND
INDIAN.

The result of the attack of the Relief Force
on the Turks entrenched in the Sannaiyat
position is that the Relief Force has not yet
won its way through, but is entrenched close
to the Turks, in places some two hundred
to three hundred yards distant. General
Gorringe wired me last night he was con-
solidating his position as close to the enemy’s
trenches as he can get, with the intention of
attacking again. He has had some difficulty
with the floods, which he has remedied.

I have no other details. However, you will
see that I must not run any risk over the
date calculated to which our rations would
last—namely, the 15th of April—as you all
understand well that digging means delay,
although General Gorringe does not say so.

I am compelled, therefore, to appeal to
you all to make a determined effort to eke out
our scanty means, so that I can hold out for
certain till our comrades arrive, and I know
I shall not appeal to you in vain.

I have, then, to reduce the rations to five
ounces of meal for all ranks, British and Indian.

In this way I can hold out till the 21st of April if it becomes necessary, but it is my duty to take all precautions in my power.

In my communiqué to you on 26th of January I told you that our duty stood out plain and simple—it was to stand here and hold up the Turkish advance on the Tigris, working heart and soul together; and I expressed the hope that we would make this defence to be remembered in history as a glorious one, and I asked you in this connection to remember the defence of Plevna, which was longer than even that of Ladysmith.

Well, you have nobly carried out your mission, you have nobly answered the trust and appeal I put to you; the whole British Empire, let me tell you, is ringing with our defence of Kut.

You will all be proud to say one day: “I was one of the garrison of Kut,” and as for Plevna and Ladysmith, we have outlasted them also. Whatever happens now we have all done our duty, as I said in my last report of the defence of this place, which has now been telegraphed to Headquarters. I said that it was not possible in dispatches to mention everyone, but I could safely say that every individual in this force had done his duty to his King and Country.

I was absolutely calm and confident, as I told you on the 26th of January, of the ultimate result—and I am confident now. I ask you all, comrades of all ranks, British and Indian, to help me now in this food question as I ask you above.

(Signed) CHARLES TOWNSHEND,
Major-General,
Commanding the Garrison at Kut.

Kut-el-Amara,
10th April, 1916.

COMMUNIQUÉ TO THE TROOPS.

It became clear after General Gorringe's second repulse on 22nd of April at Sannaiyat, of which I was informed by Army Commander by wire, that the Relief Force could not win its way through in anything like time to relieve us, our limit of resistance as regards food being the 29th of April.
I was then ordered to open negotiations for the surrender of Kut in the words of the Army Commander's telegram, "the onus not resting on yourself. You are in the position of having conducted a gallant and successful defence, and you will be in a position to get better terms than any emissary of ours. . . . The Admiral, who has been in consultation with the Army Commander, considers that you with your prestige are likely to get the best terms. We can, of course, supply food as you may arrange."

These considerations alone—namely, that I can help my comrades of all ranks to the end—have decided me to overcome my bodily illness and the anguish of mind which I am suffering now, and I have interviewed the Turkish General-in-Chief yesterday, who is full of admiration at "our heroic defence of five months," as he put it.

Negotiations are still in progress, but I hope to be able to announce your departure for India on parole not to serve against the Turks, since the Turkish Commander-in-Chief says he thinks it will be allowed; and has wired to Constantinople to ask for this, and that the Julnar, which is lying with food for us at Magasis now, may be permitted to come to us.

Whatever has happened, my comrades, you can only be proud of yourselves. We have done our duty to King and Empire. The whole world knows we have done our duty.

I ask you to stand by me in the next few days with your ready and splendid discipline shown throughout. We may possibly go into camp, I hope, between the fort and the town along the shore, whence we can easily embark.

(Signed) C. V. F. Townshend,
Major-General,
Commanding 6th Division and Force at Kut.
Kut-el-Amara,
28th April, 1916.