



## THE MESOPOTAMIAN CAMPAIGN 1914-1918

If there is one thing worse than being at the mercy of one Government's plans it must be being at the mercy of two and that was precisely the problem for the men fighting in Mespots (which the men, always able to find just the right slang word, called Mesopotamia – and it certainly was a mess of pottage - a particularly evil mess at that)

The campaign was administered from London and organised from Delhi, sometimes more comfortably from the cooler hill station at Simla. In the hot season the Government of the Raj took to its heels and headed for the hills. The soldiers in Mesopotamia, for whom they were responsible but were neglecting, meanwhile marched and fought in intense heat. The Viceroy was Lord Hardinge of Penshurst.

There was also a further complication insofar as both Governments were following their own personal, diametrically opposed, political paths resulting in secrecy and general obfuscation between the two. This in turn caused the most appalling suffering for the serving Anglo-Indian armies between 1914 and 1916, the evidence for which can now be found in documents at the National Archives, on which 50 and 75 year restrictions had been placed; in the War Diaries, some of which can be read on-line and also the present publications of personal diaries and letters. It could be argued that these men did not 'sacrifice themselves for king and country' but were thrown on the sacrificial fire of military incompetence, political ambition, over-arching egos and criminal neglect.

**A Brief Background:** When the Turks became Germany's allies London requested Delhi to send a contingent to Basra to protect the Navy's oil supplies, and to give support to the pro-British sheik, the owner of the wells. This was done but unknown to London the commanding officer appointed by India, General Sir John Nixon, carried with him orders to capture Baghdad. He was provisioned and equipped to carry out tactics to Qurna. He did not have enough men, equipment, supplies, food, weapons, transport or medical supplies to undertake such 'mission creep'. The appointment of Nixon had caused dismay in the army, as did his promotion of General Sir George Goring and that dismay was proved to be prescient. Both men were a disaster.

General Charles Townshend CB, DSO, was also sent out from India and under him the army had initial success as they advanced up the Tigris capturing Qurna, Amara, and Kut-al-Amara, the army advancing despite the Secretary of State for India in London, Austin Chamberlain, repeatedly asking for assurance regarding capability and reiterating that nothing could be supplied from London. Nixon sent assurances that his force was capable of the advances.

Once Kut-al-Amara had been occupied Townshend said his army was exhausted and should wait before proceeding further but Nixon urged him on, at the same time hiding from him information he had been sent that the Turks had not only received 30,000 reinforcements but were commanded by a German General, Colmar von der Goltz. In ignorance of this Townshend continued to Ctesiphon and Nemesis struck. They retreated to Kut-al-Amara and were besieged. Three unsuccessful attempts were made to relieve them but after a siege lasting longer than Ladysmith and at the point of starvation they had to surrender and the garrison was taken into captivity and suffered appalling conditions and treatment.

There was an enquiry which finally revealed just what the whole army in Mesopotamia had been enduring since 1914 due to the machinations of the Indian government and the Generals such as Nixon and Gorringe. London took over completely, everything was reorganised and new Generals were appointed. The War Diaries show the affects. From then on there was the successful re-capture of Kut and the final march into Bagdad.

Before continuing here are the details of the **men of our villages who were involved:**

We have found eight. They are John Seal, Charles Stokes, Lewis Dibdin, Thomas Boorer, Herbert Skinner, his nephew George Skinner, Douglas Oliver and H. Stafford.

**Thomas Boorer:** He was born about 1882 in Lingfield, the son of James and Jane Boorer, and became a bricklayer, like his father. In 1911 they lived in Rushford Cottages, Station Road, Lingfield. Thomas enlisted in the Queen's (Royal West Surrey) Regiment. The Queen's held the Euphrates Line and did not take part in the siege of Kut or the relieving forces but were responsible for the blockading of the Euphrates at Nasiriyeh, captured in June 1915. As Nixon was the C.O. for the Tigris Line, so Gorringe was for the Euphrates line.

The principal compiler of their War Diary was a Lieutenant W. Spens, later Captain and Adjutant, who not only noted the facts but allowed himself comment, criticism and opinions. During the early campaigns we learn of the complaints about food, the shortage of boots and helmets and the lack of proper mosquito nets. Then, after the reorganisation following the Enquiry of 1917 he writes that supplies are much better, that the Battalion has never been so well served and that "the frozen beef from Argentina is much appreciated."

The diaries also graphically describe the heat, sand storms, floods, the battles, the wounded, the loss of men, and also show their courage, humour and resilience.

**Captain Lewis Dibden:** Born 1884 at 25 Gayton Road. Hampstead, London, son of Lewis Tonna Dibden who became chairman of the Executive Committee of the Lingfield Emergency Committee after the resignation of P. de Clermont who had joined the Army Service Corps. Lewis Jnr. became a barrister like his father and in 1911 lived at Nobles, Dormansland. He enlisted in the Queen's like Thomas Boorer and joined the Regiment from India as one of a group of five 'reinforcements'. W. Spens uses the War Diary to express the extreme annoyance the Battalion feels – "We do not want these men" he writes "they completely upset the whole Battalion. They are senior to the men currently holding their ranks who will all have to lose seniority." He considers this most unfair, particularly as the men losing seniority have been fighting since 1915 and now they will be junior to men fresh out of India.

**Major Douglas G. Oliver:** Born 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 1881 in Kensington, son of Edward and Eliza Oliver. Edward was a solicitor and in 1901 lived in New Place, Station Road, Lingfield.

Douglas was in the Indian Army and his first command was on the 17<sup>th</sup> January, 1900 with the rank of captain. He went to Mesopotamia in command of the 67<sup>th</sup> Punjabis and died at the Battle of Hanna as part of the Relieving Force.

General Aylmer had already failed twice and his forces were weakened. Nevertheless, Nixon ordered him to try again. Aylmer faced a Turkish force of some 30,000 men; he had about 10,000. On the morning of 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1916 the attack started with a weak bombardment (as a result of the parsimony which affected the whole Campaign, the artillery did not have sufficient guns). It was totally ineffectual and only alerted the Turks to the attack. As a result about 60% of the men, advancing through deep water, were cut down by carefully sited machine gun positions. We have no details as to whether Douglas Oliver was killed or died as a result of the scandalous lack of medical provision.

**John N. Seal:** Born 1876 in Four Elms, Kent, son of John and Eliza Seal. His father was a blacksmith. In 1891 the family lived in St. John's, Dormansland. In 1911 John Jnr was married, lived at 73 Hambro Road, Streatham and worked on the trams.

He enlisted in the Royal West Kent Regiment and arrived in Basra via Bombay in February 1915 and was attached to the 12<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade Division. He fought in the battle to capture Nasiriyeh, regarded as one of the grimmest of the campaign, undertaken when the Tigris and Euphrates were in flood, resulting in "too much water for the army and not enough for the navy". Ships had difficulty getting upstream, a massive barrage blocking the advance had to be blown up and Gorringe changed the battle plans part way causing totally unnecessary deaths. The various battalions were furious. "He is a rotten general" wrote General Mellis, "and we all felt a lack of confidence in him." The Senior Naval Officer, Wilfred Nunn, seeing the exhausted soldiers staggering through a driving sandstorm commented "No doubt all ranks were gratified to hear King George's message to Nixon about the splendid achievement of Gorringe's column "despite the many hardships and intense heat" and that he was "filled with admiration". Unfortunately, Nixon and Hardinge used this success to push for the advance on Kut.

John Seal was also in the battle of Ctesiphon and in besieged Kut-al-Amara, where he died on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 1916, three days before the surrender.

One of the surgeons in the besieged town, W.C. Spackman, mentions that he ensured the proper burial of the dead and informed the Commonwealth War Grave Commission of the site. The comment may be significant because the Arabs robbed the graves so it became the practice to bury men in a disguised grave with another seemingly proper one nearby to mislead. The Commission collected bodies and transferred them to their sites. There is a CWGC certificate for John showing he is buried in the Amara War Cemetery. Unfortunately, in view of the situation in Iraq the Commission is unable to care for the graves at present and they may have been desecrated.

**George Skinner** Born 1894 in Lingfield, Surrey, son of James and Ann Skinner. In 1911 he was living in the High Street, Edenbridge, Kent. He enlisted in the Queen's (Royal West Surrey) Regiment on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1916 and transferred to the Machine Gun Corps on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1916. We have the following details from his service record: Height – 5 feet 5 inches. Posted – 11<sup>th</sup> February 1917. At the Advanced Depot, Amara – 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1917. Joined 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion – 14<sup>th</sup> June 1917. Promoted to Lance Corporal. On the 15<sup>th</sup> November 1919 he was in hospital with dysentery. On the 13<sup>th</sup> February 1920 He embarked at Basra for the United Kingdom. He was discharged on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1920.

There are a few things to note about George's records – he went to Mesopotamia for the second 'much improved' section of the Campaign so he was fortunate to miss the earlier conditions. However, when it came to demobilisation he did not come in the first category. He was not married and his pre-war employment did not fall within the 'vital' sector (farmers, builders, miners, public utility workers, railwaymen, etc. – people considered necessary for rebuilding the economy) hence his late demob date. It meant he was still in the Middle East when the decisions were taken regarding the splitting up of the Ottoman Empire and would, therefore, have been involved in the unrest that followed. As he left, squadrons of the RAF were arriving. This will be something for our Aftermath Exhibition.

**Herbert Skinner** (George's uncle). Born 1881 in Lingfield, son of John and Frances Skinner. By 1914 he was married with one daughter and lived at Pollards Cottage, Lingfield. He was a skilled carpenter and joiner. We have his service record: Height – 5 feet 7 inches. He enlisted in the Royal Engineers, was attested on the 7<sup>th</sup> June, 1916 and posted on the 8<sup>th</sup> November 1916. Proceeded to Mesopotamia on the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1917. Embarked on HMT Empress of Britain at Durban on the 10<sup>th</sup> July 1917 and disembarked at Bombay on the 25<sup>th</sup> July 1917. There he went on HMT Egra on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917 and disembarked at Basra on the 6<sup>th</sup> August 1917. On the 28<sup>th</sup> August he was admitted to hospital with sand fly fever. Discharged 28<sup>th</sup> August and joined the Regiment on the same day. He was demobilised on the 28<sup>th</sup> May 1919. (He was married, had a family and his skills were needed so he was luckier than his nephew. Like him, he also avoided the disastrous years 1914-1916).

**Charles Stokes** Born Alconbury, Huntingdonshire. In 1914 he was living in Dormansland and enlisted in the Royal West Kent Regiment. He was in besieged Kut-al-Amara and was among those who became prisoners when the town was surrendered and died as a POW. There were subsequent enquiries about men who died in Kut or as POWs and it may be possible to find more information regarding Charles Stokes and John Seal which will be included in our Aftermath Exhibition.

**H.G. Stafford** His name was discovered in the archives of the Queen's (Royal Surrey) Regiment in the Record of Returned Prisoners of War at the Surrey History Centre. Some of the details are not totally legible but he is shown as returning to Lingfield. He appears in the West Surrey book but may have belonged to the East Surreys, their 5th Battalion details having seemingly merged with those of the former's 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion. He was a corporal, a prisoner in Baghdad and must have been freed when the British finally marched into the city in 1917. He is shown as being in the Airun (Armanus) Camp, Section 16. He was sent to Hospital in Marseilles and finally came home on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 1917.

We have no more details as yet. There were several Staffords in Limpsfield so maybe that was where he was born and moved to Lingfield at a later date.

**Regiments involved:** The army comprised predominantly Indian regiments – the 48<sup>th</sup> Pioneers, in which Lieutenant Spackman was the Medical Officer; the 1/67 Punjabis in which Douglas Oliver was a Captain and then a Major. There were other Indian Divisions to which were attached the various Battalions of British regiments which had been sent out to serve in the Indian Army, including the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Royal West Kent, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Queens (Royal West Surrey) and the 5<sup>th</sup> East Surreys.

**Kut-al-Amara (not to be confused with Amara)**

Newspapers seem to have misunderstood what happened at Ctesiphon. They referred to it as a 'fine achievement', the Daily Mail was quite ecstatic, but if it was a victory it was a Pyrrhic

one. In fact it was all rather odd. Townshend appears to have thought he was overwhelmed only to realise that the Turks seemed to think they were, but then the reinforcements arrived and our retreat began. Perhaps if Nixon had passed on the information regarding the reinforcements and the German General, Townshend would have had different battle plans and less confusion. We had about 5000 casualties and lost two river gunboats. Before the battle Nixon himself turned up, to everyone's surprise, having travelled upstream in his boat, which the soldiers called The Gin Palace. He said he was not well enough to assume command and tried to get Townsend to sign the paper for the attack which he refused to do. Perhaps Nixon was hoping to cover himself in case of disaster. He retreated quickly once the firing started and then did something which destroyed any remaining goodwill the hard pressed medical teams may have had for him.

It was with this battle in particular that the shortage of equipment and river transport became disastrous, as will be seen in the Enquiry section. Knowing what a problem there would be the medical teams were loading a barge with wounded for the hospital in Amara with the idea that Nixon's boat could tow it and drop the men off on the way to Basra. Nixon refused to wait. His business in Basra was too important for him to delay his departure.

### **The Siege of Kut-al-Amara**

The siege of Kut began on the 5 December 1915. It lasted longer than that of Ladysmith in the Boer War (2<sup>nd</sup> November 1899 to the 28<sup>th</sup> February 1900).

One of the first things Townshend did was to send Lt. Colonel Gerard Leachman, of the Royal Sussex Regiment away with the Cavalry. Leachman was an intelligence officer and familiar with the country. Townshend felt the Cavalry had the opportunity of escaping which the Infantry did not. He also feared there would not be enough fodder for the horses. There was some doubt about him choosing Leachman. Townshend himself was well known for having no skill in communicating with Arabs whereas Leachman was very experienced and able. It is possible that in the negotiations which lay ahead Leachman may have been able to bring about the satisfactory ending Townshend failed to do.

Kut, situated on a large bend on the Tigris, was not ideal. London sent an urgent telegram instructing that the retreat should continue to Amara, but it arrived too late, apart from which Townshend said his remaining wounded and the troops generally were too exhausted to go further.

The garrison started with complete confidence that they would be relieved quickly but gradually hope faded. Townshend was considered to be at fault because he underestimated how long his supplies would last and therefore caused rescue attempts to be made without enough time for proper planning. T.E. Lawrence on the other hand said they failed because Nixon and Gorrington were incapable of organising them.

Eventually the garrison was reduced to eating the remaining horses, mules and ponies. They shot starlings.

There was still some humour. On the 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1916, they had a spoof '16<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner for the Relief of Ladysmith, at the Hotel Optimus, Kut'. The Menu consisted of d'Artillerie Soup, followed by Sole – Trench Sabot. The joint was Horse Loin with Shell Trimmings or Mule Saddle with Bhoosa Sauce, served with Vegetable au Cotton. The sweet was Windy Lizzie Pudding with Flatulent Fanny Sauce; the Savoury was Whizz Bangs with Starlings on Toast. Wines were Liquorice, Tigris Water and Date Juice. The 'meal' was

followed by a concert, all the items being a play on words of the situation in which they found themselves.

However, matters were getting serious and hopes of relief were fading:

### **Diet at Kut**

#### **British:**

Bread - After the first week reduced to 12 oz , 6 weeks later to 10, then 8, in the last week to 6 oz.

Meat - For about 6 weeks fresh beef, then bouli beef (bully beef), then beef of the battery bullocks, then horseflesh.

Fresh vegetables, potatoes, onions, ceased early

Butter and bacon reduced at an early stage. Ceased about 2 and a half months ago.

Jam ceased about a month ago.

Potato meal continued for about a fortnight.

Tea and sugar all gone about 10 weeks ago.

Dates replaced sugar about a fortnight ago.

#### **Indian**

At end of first week atta (wheat flour) reduced to 1 and a quarter lbs., then 1 lb with 6 oz barley

The barley flour reduced to 10 oz and 3 oz parched

Finally 5 oz barley flour only.

Meat cut abruptly at beginning of siege.

During first week full ration of ghee – 2 oz

Then by 1 month to 1½ oz, for another month to 1 oz and for 2 months half an oz. then nothing for last week.

For first week full ration of 4 oz dhal reduced to three , then 2, then 1 oz.

None since beginning of March.

Ghun (cane sugar) ceased beginning of March, dates instead.

At end of the siege the British were down to 1850 calories instead of 3400 and Indians down to 1010 instead of 3100.

There was problem with the Indians who, for caste and religious reasons, would not eat horsemeat. A special dispensation was sent from India which persuaded some to eat it but most would not. Because of unfamiliarity with meat in diet many had stomach problems. If they could have been persuaded to eat it, it would have slowed the rate of debility. As a result the British were very thin but the Indians were skeletal.

The garrison were being shelled, there were wounded, also the usual illnesses were taking their toll.

It was all very different from their arrival in 1914, when the battles had been easy and the troops seemed to enjoy themselves. They did not like Basra which they regarded as insanitary, but they had some fun trying to master the bellums – large unwieldy boats propelled by one oar and one pole. Their third easy battle was at Qurna said to be the site of the Garden of Eden. Sadly the only thing flowery about it was the way the soldiers expressed their opinion. However, in the way that the troops gave various names to places in the trenches so these soldiers named parts of Qurna, for example Eve's Garden, Adam's Walk, Serpent Alley, Temptation Square etc.

Fortunately they did not know what was ahead of them. The climate, the intense heat and bitter cold (in the Royal West Surreys' War Diary there is a report of exhausted men being left in a hut to rest but who were found to have died from the cold when a party was sent to bring them in), sun turning to torrential rain, flash floods sweeping away men, animals, equipment without warning. Millions of flies, making men at a distance looking as if they were wearing chainmail, swarming over food, blinding men and horses. Mists and mirages to add to the confusion, and the endemic diseases; all this apart from wounds.

Now, in Kut, they were in a different dire situation. One more attempt to relieve them was attempted but failed, a very brave attempt to get supplies to them was tried with a boat but the captain was murdered and the lieutenant killed. So – surrender was the only option. Negotiations were carried out by T.E. Lawrence and Aubrey Herbert, an Intelligence Officer. The Government in London had tried bribing the Turks, offering a million pounds in gold for the garrison to go free. It was refused and surrender had to be unconditional, with the sick and wounded being exchanged for Turkish prisoners.

The garrison destroyed all that was of military value and on the 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1916 about 2,500 British and 9,300 Indian troops were taken into captivity. About 345 (unconfirmed) were exchanged. The death march started on the 6<sup>th</sup> May. 1,750 British troops died on the march or in POW camps. 2,500 Indians died.

Townshend was a very ambiguous character. There are many conflicting views of him but the blackest mark against him was that while the men he commanded were suffering so much he was taken with his servants first to Constantinople and then to an island where he seemingly existed comfortably and after the war he said the Turks treated him “like an honoured guest”. He never seemed to understand the deprivation of his forces.

Others had their problems – Lord Kitchener for one, who had to make a speech in the House of Lords about the fall of Kut, considered the “greatest humiliation the British Army had suffered”. There he was, in a place where he could not lie but could not tell the whole truth. What was he to say? Well, he fractured English somewhat with sentences like “I am not travelling beyond the actual facts in saying...” What does that mean? The whole speech is of “brilliantly fought engagements” and the men had gone off into “honourable captivity”. The praise is fulsome. The recriminations for those considered to have brought about the catastrophe were to follow.

The Enquiry in 1917 was inevitable. Despite attempts to hide the true situation in Mesopotamia (even to the extreme and unprecedented step of the censoring of officers' letters by the Staff) the press started to print the truth. The relief efforts had cost 23,000 casualties, which was almost the fighting strength of the Tigris Line. Who was to blame – Townshend, Nixon, Gorringer? The various diaries give a variety of opinions. Gorringer fares badly – “Kut could have been relieved by a good, or even respectable, general. Instead the relief was commanded by a man loathed and distrusted – the troops have been thrown away in dribbles, every principle of war has been discarded.”

### **A Recap:**

Before dealing with the Enquiry here is a summary of the problems:

Nixon blatantly lied. London had constantly queried if he was sufficiently provisioned and had enough men to make his proposed advances, repeating that anything that was needed must come from India, London was unable to supply anything. Nixon always wired back that

he had all he wanted. When asked about medical arrangements he said the men were fit and in good spirits and there was plenty of medical equipment.

The truth – no arrangements had been made for water supplies. The only water available was straight from the Tigris or the Euphrates with no means of purification with the inevitable result.

Temperatures could rise to 42 degrees C. in the shade. Men did not march or fight in the shade. An entry in the Queens, Royal West Surrey Regiment notes that during the course of one battle some men had lost their reason from lack of water.

Diseases - dysentery, cholera, enteric, malaria, typhus, pneumonia, heat stroke, beri-beri. Drowning was also listed as cause of death – flash floods swept away men, animals and equipment.

The flies: There is an Arab proverb – “When Allah made hell He did not think it was bad enough, so he added Mesopotamia – then He added flies”.

Nixon had two cars but there were no ambulances (The Turks did have them). The wounded were put in wooden and iron, carts, no springs, used for carrying supplies, four to a cart, pulled by mules. In these men with broken limbs, open wounds, head injuries were bounced over the desert to the river for transport to the hospitals at Amara or Basra.

Unfortunately there were not enough boats and although the medical staff tried desperately to get the wounded away on the tide sometimes the number was too great which meant waiting for the next tide.

The shortage of boats was firstly Nixon’s responsibility. An expert had been sent out from India to discuss with him the development of the quay at Basra and the ordering of shipping. He found Nixon so impossible to work with he returned to India, only to be sent back with instructions that he had to find a way to get co-operation.

Challenged early in the campaign Nixon had asked why boats were necessary. “Infantry marched” he said. It was pointed out that when the two rivers were in flood infantry that had “marched” with water up to their thighs and rising would not exactly be fit to fight. However, whilst the efforts to relieve Kut were underway a General Cowper sent a telegram to Sir Beauchamp Duff in India, warning him that unless more shipping could be provided they were in danger of not being able to relieve the town. Incredibly Duff replied “Please tell General Cowper that if anything of this sort occurs again and I receive any more querulous demands I shall have him removed from the Force and will refuse him of further employment of any kind.” That was to become a major factor at the Enquiry.

There was a shortage of drugs, castor oil, Epsom salts, emetics, quinine. bandages and splints; men had to tear up their shirts to provide bandages.

There was a desperate shortage of medical staff and the Commission was quick to emphasise that no blame attached to them. They worked in dreadful conditions. There were not enough clearing stations. In heat so intense that efficient fans were needed in the hospitals in Amara and Baghdad, there were none. Lieutenant Spackman, newly commissioned as a subaltern and newly qualified as a surgeon found his Battalion’s medical team was himself, an elderly Indian and 12 Indian stretcher bearers.

There was not enough food and what there was totally unappetising and unsuitable for the climate.



Even basic things were missing – no maps for the army, no charts for the navy. War diaries show there were no boots, helmets, replacement uniforms available. No adequate mosquito nets were supplied. No thought was given regarding the supply chain or communications

**The Mesopotamian Commission** opened on the 21<sup>st</sup> August 1916 and was a damning indictment of the structure and parsimony of the Indian Administration. It was accused of having a culture of ‘keeping quiet’ rather than voicing criticism; of regarding that keeping down costs was more meritorious than efficiency; that money could only be provided for one project if it was cut from another.

Hardinge was severely criticised for a communication regarding a request for reinforcements to be sent which read “They will give us nothing if the least sign of willingness is shown by us”. The assembling of a force was hidden.

Beauchamp Duff’s reply to the request for more boats has been mentioned above. He was heavily criticised.

The Secretary of State for India, Austin Chamberlain was also criticised, as was Nixon. Sir Brian Cox was held responsible for the orders given to Nixon regarding advancing on Baghdad.

Despite considerable praise for his military prowess and care for the wounded, Townshend became the military scapegoat. He was not present of course, but his adjutant tried to speak for him. He was popular with the men but junior officers seemed to have doubts about him. He shut himself away as the siege dragged on. His adjutant was of the opinion it affected him mentally. The Commission praised him for his military strategy and for carrying it out with so few casualties (excluding Ctesiphon – which could be regarded as Nixon’s responsibility. Sir Beauchamp Duff was the political scapegoat. He became an alcoholic and committed suicide.

The Cabinet debated the question of publishing the Report for two months. It was published but it must have been sanitised, otherwise there would have been no reason to place such a long restriction on it and all the files arising from it.

The above is only a summary – it is a long report, with questions to witnesses and replies. However, here is one part of the Report in more detail, regarding the highly controversial medical problems. This is not pleasant reading.

“Ctesiphon.....over 3,500 wounded had to be removed from the battlefield [about one third of the force] to the river bank, in some cases a distance of 10 miles, without proper ambulance transport, and without a sufficiency of medical personnel, food, and of comforts, so a large proportion had to make their way on foot in spite of their injured condition. When they arrived at the river the available steamer accommodation was gravely inadequate. The wounded and weary men had to be crowded into steamers and barges without sufficient medical attention, appliances or conveniences.

Some of the wounded were disembarked at Amara but the majority went on down to Basra, a journey from the battlefield which, in some cases, took as much as fourteen days and the discomforts of the wounded were aggravated by the presence of many cases of dysentery and other sickness.....not a hint of this regrettable breakdown is to be found in the official

report sent to England after the battle. [When Nixon was questioned about his telegram confirming the medical provision was perfectly adequate he said he was sick at the time and did not remember it but “as it was sent in my name I must take responsibility”. A lot of these witnesses suffered from the epidemic of memory loss which afflicts such people at such times]

We are reluctant to describe the details of the condition in which many of the wounded arrived at Basra on account of their sickening horror, but we deem it necessary to quote one witness on this subject because it brings home the appalling nature of the sufferings which were glossed over by the authorities. Major Carter, IMS, who was in medical charge of the hospital ship Varela, waiting for the wounded from Ctesiphon, thus describes the arrival of one of the river convoys:

‘I was standing on the bridge in the evening that the Medijieh arrived. She had two steel barges without protection against the rain and as far as I remember as this ship came to us I saw she was absolutely packed and the barges too with men.

The barges were slipped and the Medijiah was brought alongside the Varela and when she was about 300-400 yards off it looked as if she was festooned with ropes. The stench when she was close was quite definite and I found that what I had mistook for ropes were dried stalactites of human faeces. The patients were so huddled and crowded together on the ship they could not perform the office of nature clearing the edge of the ship and the whole of the ship’s side was covered with faeces.

A certain number of men were standing and kneeling on the immediate perimeter of the ship.

Then we found a mass of men huddled anyhow, some with blankets, some without. They were lying in a pool of dysentery, about 30 feet square, covered with dysentery and dejecta from head to foot. With regard to the first man I thought he had a haemorrhage. His trousers were full of something warm and slimy. I thought he had blood clots. I put my hand in his trousers. He had dysentery. He had a fractured thigh, perforated in five to six places. He had apparently been writhing about the deck. Many cases were almost as bad. There were a certain number of cases with terrible bed sores. In my report I describe mercilessly to the Government of India how I found men with their limbs splinted with wood strips from Johnny Walker whisky boxes. They were British and Indian troops.’ “

So, Duff and Townshend were the victims, what of the others? Austin Chamberlain resigned. He was blamed for accepting bad advice, on the ground that whoever is in charge must take full responsibility for the actions of those under him. He was back in the cabinet within six months. Sir Brian Cox survived unscathed and played a part in the post-war negotiations with T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell. Hardinge offered his resignation three times but was told he was ‘too politically important’. His time as Viceroy was coming to an end anyway. He became Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office; he also became a Knight of the Garter. He was the Viceroy He was the leader. Why did the criticism given to Chamberlain not apply to him? Had Hardinge no sense of shame? Nixon, amazingly, was exonerated on the grounds he was incapable of dealing with the Mesopotamian offence and it was those who had appointed him who were at fault. (Hardinge again).

Rudyard Kipling’s poem sums it up perfectly:

### **MESOPOTAMIA**

They shall not return to us, the young  
The eager and whole-hearted whom we gave:  
But the men who left them to die in their own dung  
Shall they come with years and honour to the grave?

They shall not return to us, the strong men coldly slain  
In sight of help denied them day to day;  
But the men who edged their agonies and chid them in their pain,  
Are they too strong and wise to put away?

Our dead shall not return to us while Day and Night divide –  
Never while the bars of sunset hold,  
But the idle-minded overlings who quibbled while they died,  
Shall they thrust for high employment as of old?

Shall we threaten them and be angry for an hour,  
When the storm is ended shall we find  
How softly but how softly they have sidled back to power  
By the favour and contrivance of their kind?

Even while they soothe us, while they promise large amends,  
Even while they make a show of fear,  
Do they call upon their debtors and take counsel with their friends,  
To confirm and establish each career?

Their lives cannot repay us – their death could not undo –  
The shame they have laid upon our race.  
But the slothfulness that wasted and the arrogance that slew,  
Shall we leave it unabated in its place?

(The idle-minded overlings refer to Hardinge and Duff. The former's defence of the actions he had, or had not, taken were described as "Half a whine and half an attempt to shift the blame")

Kipling wrote another equally bitter poem:

#### **THE DEATH OF A STATESMAN**

I could not dig, I dare not rob  
And so I lied, to please the mob.  
Now all my lies are proved untrue  
And I must face the men I slew.  
What will serve me now, here among  
All these angry and defrauded young?

During the autumn of 1916 General Sir Stanley Maude took command of the British Mesopotamian Army. He improved the base at Basra, he made certain of his supply lines and communications. Ambulances were available. Lorries were available. Water could now be taken from the river and delivered to a camp and purified (back in 1915 a young medical orderly found that with the death of the surgeon in battle he was left to deal with about 500 wounded. There was no water and the nearest source was 6 miles away but there was no transport to collect it).

Only when he was certain that everything was in place did Maude begin his advance and in December 1916 he started a new offensive up the Tigris with 50,000 men. It is probably in this contingent that George Skinner in the machine gun corps and Herbert Skinner in the Royal Engineers served.

Kut was recaptured on the 24<sup>th</sup> February 1917, followed by Aziziyeh on the 5<sup>th</sup> March and finally Baghdad on the 11<sup>th</sup> March. This was not the end – there were more battles ahead. Unfortunately Maude died of cholera on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1917.

The Mesopotamian Campaign ground to a halt rather than going out in a blaze of glory and ended on the 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1918. A private diary of a Queen's soldier is at the Surrey History Centre and it records lessening attacks by snipers and aircraft and more about inter-regimental sport, such as a football match (which the Queen's lost) and boxing matches (which he won).

Mesopotamia was overshadowed by the intensity of the Western Front and the catastrophe of Gallipoli. It was also called 'a side show' as if it was of no significance. After the fall of Kut one officer remarked "Perhaps now it will become the main event". Another remarked that he felt the political agenda was leading us into trouble we would regret – a remarkable prediction in the circumstances.

It is still a hidden campaign. It gets little mention. Does the shame still linger? It will be interesting to see how much attention it receives in this time of commemoration.

M. Priestley ©1014

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