

Axminster's Contribution to the Mesopotamia Campaign of World War I

The 1st/4th (Territorial) Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment

Prior to the outbreak of World War I there were active Territorial Army units in many Devon towns, including Axminster. When war was declared these units formed specific battalions within the Devonshire Regiment. One of these, and the one into which many Axminster men were incorporated, was the 1st/4th Battalion. After training on Woodbury Common, the battalion was sent to India (from where many regular troops had already been dispatched to fight in France).

Further information on this 'higher level' aspect of the way in which the army was organised during World War I, plus a great deal of campaign-by-campaign detail as well, can be found on various websites, including keepmilitarymuseum.org (specialising in the history of the Devonshire and Dorsetshire Regiments) and a privately-run but highly informative website called 'The Long, Long Trail' (longlongtrail.co.uk).

From India to Mesopotamia, and the Period to late 1916

In October 1914 the 1st/4th Battalion, together with other units collectively described as the Indian Division, and under the command of Brigadier General W S Delamain, arrived in Bahrain, from where they proceeded to the mouth of the Shatt al Arab waterway¹, which they reached on 6 November. They established a base at Abadan a few days later, and entered the city of Basra on 22 November. From Basra the invading force proceeded up the Shatt al Arab to Al Qurnah, at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, which was captured on 9 December 1914. Access to the oilfields was thereby secured, together with a degree of control over the Persian Gulf.

In 1914 Mesopotamia (largely the same territory as modern-day Iraq) was a province of the Ottoman Empire, and the purpose of landing a British and Indian force in Mesopotamia was to secure continuing access to the oilfields of southern Iraq and western Iran (Persia), and to oblige the Ottoman Army to send troops well away from their European and Russian borders. There was no wider strategic interest to be pursued, or if there was, it has not been widely understood by later commentators.

At this point some of the larger battleships which had escorted the force from India to the Gulf left for the Dardanelles, leaving a smaller sloop and some armed river steamers and launches which could navigate the Tigris in particular (the Tigris being the river on which Baghdad sits). In March 1915 additional gunboats arrived from England and from other duties. It was clear that further territorial gains were to be attempted, and that in the absence of roads and railways, the river would be the main access and supply route.

In April 1915 the Ottoman Turks mounted an attack on Basra, but they were repulsed by the occupying forces. They were then pursued up the river Tigris by a force including the 1st/4th Battalion commanded by Major General Charles Vere Ferrers Townshend, while a second force worked its way up the Euphrates to An Nasiriyah. On 31 May General Townshend's

¹ The Shatt al Arab is the stretch of river, about 100 miles in length, which runs from the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers at Al Qurnah, to the Persian Gulf near Abadan.

force, spearheaded by a flotilla of relatively small craft, fought an amphibious battle to the north of Al Qurnah and, in what was described as a 'brilliant little victory' captured the town of Al Amara. In what must have seemed the height of new technology, four sea-planes arrived to join the expeditionary force.

Four months later, on 28 September 1915, General Townshend and his force captured the town of Kut (sometimes known as Al Kut, and at others as Kut al Amara). The significance of Kut was that it controlled a river which links the Tigris and Euphrates, and in combination with the garrison at An Nasiriyah, prevented the Ottoman Turks from reaching Basra and the Gulf.

General Townshend decided to continue, and advanced on Baghdad, encountering increasing resistance the closer he got. His advance came to a halt at Ctesiphon, about 25 miles short of Baghdad, where an indecisive battle was fought. Various other engagements were fought, including one at Umm al Tabul on 1 December 1915.

With his momentum lost, General Townshend turned back for Kut. Along the way several of the boats on which he relied were lost or abandoned. He reached Kut on 3 December, and this was the day on which the first Axminster casualty was suffered², when **William James Russell** died of his wounds. He is buried at the Amara War Cemetery.

The supporting flotilla was sent down-river, but it was decided that Kut could, should and would be held. The Ottoman forces attacked Kut on 8 December, and started a siege which, despite several British attempts to break it, resulted in the surrender of the garrison on 29 April 1916.

May 1916 saw two further deaths of local soldiers. On 1 May 1916 **John Perham** died of his wounds at Kut. He is recorded on the Basra Memorial. On 12 May **William Smallshaw** of Uplyme died. He too is recorded on the Basra Memorial, as is **Albert Charles Maidment** who died of his wounds on 30 June. On 3 July **Lisle Frank Loveridge** died, and is buried in the Basra War Cemetery. He had been born in Kilmington, and is recorded on the Kilmington War Memorial, though his parents had by then moved to Shiphay Farm, Colyton.

On 26 August 1916 **Thomas Leonard Phippen** died of enteric fever, and is buried in the Basra War Cemetery. On 8 September **Ralph Pomeroy** died, and is buried in the Basra War Cemetery.

These six deaths, all of which occurred when there was little or no active fighting going on, illustrate a wider truth: the appalling conditions which soldiers had to face in Mesopotamia: heat, dust, flies and almost unavoidable exposure to water-borne diseases. Over the full campaign in Mesopotamia, according to 'The Long, Long Trail', the British forces lost 11,012 men killed, and 3,985 who died of their wounds; plus 13,492 who died of a range of sicknesses, 13,492 men who went missing or were taken prisoner (about 9,000 of them at Kut), and 51,836 who were wounded but recovered. It follows that the deaths of local men which are recorded here only represent part of the wider suffering.

From late 1916 to the end of the War

Later in the autumn of 1916 the British forces, including the 1st/4th Battalion launched a concerted effort to re-capture Kut from the Ottoman Turks. On 12 December a force under the command of General Sir Stanley Maude began to manoeuvre around Kut, on the west bank of the Tigris, using a combination of trench warfare and shelling from the 6" and 4"

² All of the named casualties are from Axminster, and memorialised on the Axminster War Memorial, unless it is stated to the contrary.

guns mounted on eight new gunboats to prepare for an attack on their likely lines of retreat. When General Maude died of cholera the command passed to Lieutenant General Sir William R Marshall.

It was during this period of skirmishing and attacks, on 3 February 1917, that Axminster's worst day of World War I occurred. During what is described on the keepmilitarymuseum.org website as a "... dazzlingly successful attack on the Hai Salient in the Turkish line south of Kut" no fewer than five local men were killed: Sergeants **Leonard William Lethaby** and **Frederick Charles Perham**, and three Privates: **Frederick W Coote** and brothers **Leslie Walter Sprague** and **Reginald Charles Sprague**. All except Sergeant Lethaby are buried in the Amara War Cemetery; his name is recorded on the Basra Memorial. The keepmilitarymuseum.org website also records that of the 15 officers and 403 men who attacked the Hai Salient, only 5 and 186 respectively emerged unscathed from the engagement, with 80 men killed in that one action (including, of course, the five from Axminster).

Despite outnumbering the Turkish troops by a margin of 4:1 the victory which was achieved 3 weeks later was less than total, and the British cavalry failed to cut off the Turkish retreat. Nevertheless, on 24 February 1917 Kut was re-captured.

Less than a week later, on 1 March 1917 Captain **William Henry Edward Villiers Percy-Hardman** died of his wounds. He too is buried in the Amara War Cemetery.

With the Turkish forces in full retreat, and with a much larger force than before, the British captured Baghdad on 11 March 1917.

For the 1st/4th Battalion this marked the end of active fighting, and for the rest of the war their main duties included guarding infrastructure and prisoner-of-war camps and similar supporting tasks.

It did not, however, mark the end of the Battalion's deaths. On 25 July 1917 **George Watley** (born at Chardstock and memorialised on the Axmouth War Memorial, whose parents by then lived at Combpyne) died. He is buried in the Amara War Cemetery, as is **Charles Edward Gale** of Uplyme, who died on 12 September 1917.

The last Axminster man to die in Mesopotamia was **Bertram Percival Bowles**, who was killed when a train that he was guarding blew up. Before the war he had worked at Axminster station. He is the only local man to be buried in the Baghdad War Cemetery.

There was, however, one more local casualty who had served in Mesopotamia. Captain (and Doctor) **William Charles Mence** of the Royal Army Medical Corps died in Axminster hospital on 25 July 1919. He died of an illness contracted while serving in Salonica (Greece) at the end of the war, but his service record shows that he had served in Mesopotamia in 1916. He had only come to Axminster just before the outbreak of war, to work in the newly-opened hospital on Chard Street, which is where he died 5 years later, having been away from home for almost the entire intervening period. His widow continued to live locally after his death, near Uplyme.

Afterword

The Devonshire Regiment's losses in Mesopotamia (i.e. not just those of the 1st/4th Battalion) amounted to 437 deaths in total. With 12 of these accounted for by Axminster men, and another four by men whose names appear on the War Memorials at Kilminster, Axmouth and Uplyme, it is clear that Axminster and its surrounds contributed disproportionately to the Mesopotamia campaign.