

## THE WAR AGAINST TURKEY

Turkey's entry into the war on 29 October 1914 immediately prompted Britain to open a new military front in the remote Ottoman province of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq).

British and Indian troops were sent to the Persian Gulf in early November to protect British oil interests at Abadan, and they made rapid progress inland against weak Turkish resistance. In less than a month, they had occupied the towns of Basra and Kurna, capturing more than 1,000 Turkish prisoners and losing just 65 of their own men.

Despite the unforgiving climate, British forces continued to march steadily up the River Tigris in 1915. By 28 September, under the leadership of General Charles Townshend, they had taken the town of Kut-al-Amara just 120 miles south of Mesopotamia's major city, Baghdad.

The tide turned quickly, however, at the Battle of Ctesiphon (22-26 November 1915). Envisaged as a trouble-free prelude to the final march on Baghdad, it was a bloody affair, in which Turkish troops withstood heavy casualties to defeat Townshend's attacking forces which retreated to Kut. More than half of the 8,500 British and Indian troops who fought at Ctesiphon were killed or wounded. The survivors then endured a dangerous and exhausting retreat to Kut-al-Amara without decent medical or transport facilities.

By 7<sup>th</sup> December 1915 Kut was under siege by the Turkish forces supported by German military advisors.

Meanwhile the Gallipoli campaign had been such an abject failure that preparations were being made to withdraw quietly and this was achieved by January 1916, allowing some Turkish forces to strengthen the opposition at Kut.

Kitchener's response to a second defeat after Gallipoli was to send more British troops. The 1<sup>st</sup>/6th Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment were based in Lahore

and ordered to Mesopotamia on 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1915. They were very short of equipment and eventually 32 officers and 642 other ranks embarked at Karachi.

On reaching Basra on January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1916 the battalion spent two more days on board ship before it could disembark, a foretaste of future transport difficulties. They started on foot for the front on January 10<sup>th</sup>, to an advanced base at Orah 220 miles away which they reached at the end of the month.

Food and supplies were carried on native boats which relied on the wind to sail upstream against the current. When the wind failed, mules had to go back for the rations but it was usually midnight before the men got their food. Nights were bitterly cold with hard frosts, the river was in flood and well over the banks. The troops often had to wade through the water waist-deep to encamp on soaking ground and wrap themselves in sodden blankets, for when it stopped raining the mules often indulged in a roll in the water.

The battalion joined others for the attempt to reach Kut and relieve the garrison but the Turkish forces held much of the river bank and drove the allies back.

The garrison at Kut was dependant upon supplies being brought up river from Basra, and the failure to get food and munitions led to the surrender of Kut on 29 April 1916. Over 13,000 allied soldiers surrendered to the Turks and marched to imprisonment at Aleppo where 70% of the British and 50% of the Indian troops died in captivity.

The dreadful conditions during the winter campaign led to much sickness, many of the men having been drafted to Egypt because it was thought that they would not survive the cold and wet in Flanders.

We know only that George Henry Gibbings contracted enteric fever (typhoid) and that he was in hospital in Bombay when he died on the 17<sup>th</sup> June 1916.