

THE FALL OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

The death of an Army at Kut–El–Amara

Shambles on the Tigris - a general's complacency and an abject surrender



Major General Sir Charles Vere Ferrers Townshend, KCB, DSO was a British Imperial soldier who led an overreaching military campaign in Mesopotamia during the First World War, which led to the defeat and destruction of his command.

A British army under General Sir Charles Townshend advanced 300 miles from Basra to within a few miles of Baghdad. After suffering heavy losses, Townshend, an egomaniac obsessed with his own reputation, retreated to Kut in December 1915 where he was besieged for 147 days until he surrendered on 29 April 1916.

Every blunder that could be committed was committed with terrible and unnecessary suffering inflicted on British and Indian troops. In terms of military failure, the siege of Kut was the First World War's equivalent of the fall of Singapore in 1942.

Townshend lied about how much food he had to feed his soldiers, apparently hoping to encourage the swift relief of his force. This led to a series of disastrously premature attacks in which 23,000 British and Indian soldiers were killed or wounded. The Turkish army was tougher than it looked and this part of Iraq is bleak salt marsh which floods when the Tigris and Euphrates rise.

Wounded soldiers could end up spending two weeks lying close-packed and unattended on the decks of river vessels going to Basra while their wounds turned gangrenous and filled with maggots. Townshend forbade his troops from sending messages to their families by wireless, but sent frequent ones on his own behalf demanding promotion. He made no attempt to break through the Turkish siege lines.

The tragedy did not end with Townshend's surrender. He went off to comfortable captivity on an island in the Sea of Marmara, showing more concern for the fate of his dog Spot than for the soldiers he left behind. Few officers stayed with their men, whom the Turks sent on a 1,300-mile forced march from Kut to Turkey.

The soldiers died in their thousands of starvation, thirst, mistreatment and execution as well as diseases like typhus and cholera.

When survivors arrived in the Taurus Mountains for forced labour building a railway tunnel, Armenians already there, the few still alive after the mass slaughter of their people, were shocked by the plight of the skeleton-like figures who staggered into their camp.

Overall, 70 per cent of the British and 50 per cent of the Indian soldiers who surrendered at Kut died in captivity.

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The System of Alliances

Before 1914 Europe's main powers were divided into two armed camps by a series of alliances.

These were:

The Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy (1882)

The Triple Entente of Britain, Russia and France (1907)

Although these alliances were defensive in nature, they meant that any conflict between one country from each alliance was bound to involve the other countries. The fact that Germany faced a war on two fronts greatly influenced her actions during the July Crisis.

The Italo-Turkish War "Tripolitanian War" also known in Italy as Guerra di Libia, "Libyan War" was fought between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Italy from September 29, 1911, to October 18, 1912. As a result of this conflict, Italy captured the Ottoman Tripolitania Vilayet (province) of which the most notable sub-provinces were Fezzan, Cyrenaica and Tripoli itself.

These territories together formed what became known as Italian Libya. The main significance for the First World War was that this war made it clear that no great power appeared to wish to support the Ottoman Empire any longer and this paved the way for the Balkan Wars.

By 1914 Italy was only a nominal member of the Triple Alliance, concluding a secret treaty with France by which she promised to stay neutral if Germany attacked France and when war broke out she stayed out. This meant that Germany had only one dependable ally, Austria-Hungary.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th century the Ottoman Empire had lost land in the Balkans. The great powers were also interested in extending their influence in the region.

Austrian and Russian relations were strained, because of their rivalry in the Balkans. Both hoped to expand there at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. Another important factor was the growth of Slav nationalism among the people who lived there, especially Serbia.

Russia encouraged Slav nationalism while Austria worried that this nationalism could undermine her empire. Russia supported Serbia which was very bitter at the annexation of Bosnia and saw herself as Serbia's protector. As a result of the Balkan Wars (1912 - 1913) Serbia had doubled in size and there was growing demands for the union of south Slavs (Yugoslavism) under the leadership of Serbia.

Austria had a large south Slav population in the provinces of Slovenia, Croatia, the Banat and Bosnia, and was alarmed at the growing power of Serbia.

British forces involved in Mesopotamia

For centuries before the Great War, Mesopotamia had been part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Lying along its eastern border was Persia, generally friendly to the British. The Arab Sheiks of nearby Kuwait and Muhammerah also supported Britain; the Arab tribes of coastal Mesopotamia often changed sides.

Germany had for many years before the war assiduously developed Turkey as an ally, which it saw as an important part of the *Drang nach Osten* ("Thrust towards the East": Germany wanted new lands, new markets, "lebensraum").

The Turkish army was led by German 'advisors', as was much of its trade and commerce. Although this campaign began simply to secure oil supplies for the Royal Navy, victory over the Turks became believed by some, notably David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill to be a less costly way towards defeat of Germany than the painful battering at the Western Front. Pushed by Germany, which also tried to encourage a *Jihad* (Muslim Holy War) against the British forces, Turkey was to strongly resist the British incursion.

The campaign in 1914

Britain relied heavily on oil to keep its dominant navy at sea. On the outbreak of war with Germany, it determined that it would protect its interests by occupying the oilfields and pipeline near Basra. It then pushed out a force to seize the river junction at Qurna.

The capture of Basra, 5 - 21 November 1914

5 November 1914

The orders given to Brig-General W. S. Delamain - commanding Indian Expeditionary Force 'D' were to protect the oil refineries, tanks and pipeline at Abadan and cover the landing of reinforcements if these should be required.

Only if hostilities with Turkey were to become fact should he try to occupy Basrah too, and to do this the rest of the 6th (Poona) Division of the Indian Army would arrive. News came through that Turkey had attacked Russia on the Black Sea coast and war was declared on this day.

6 November 1914

Six hundred British troops including some Royal Marines were landed near the old fort at Fao, which they captured. The rest of the Force sailed on to a place where they could safely disembark, at Sanniyeh.

Considerable difficulty was encountered as there were no barges, tugs or small boats suitable, and land transport was poor. These were factors that remained throughout the Mesopotamia campaign.

11 November 1914

British camp was attacked by 400 Turks. The attack was repulsed with heavy loss and the Turks withdrew some four miles.

12 November 1914

A reconnaissance in force inflicted further losses on the Turks near Saihan. Conditions were poor, with thick dust, mud and heat mirage. The remainder of the Poona Division now landed.

19 November 1914

Early in the day the 16th and 18th Brigades attacked the Turk fortress at Zain in a heavy rainstorm which slowed the advance to a walk. After an accurate bombardment the fort fell, leaving over 1000 Turkish casualties; the rest of the enemy streamed away, saved only by a mirage appearing which had obscured the fleeing target of the British artillery.

Cavalry were unable to pursue due to the heavy mud. British casualties in the advance of 2000 yards of open ground were 353. The Turks tried hurriedly to block the river by towing a string of ships across and sinking them. However, a cable broke and left a gap wide enough for one vessel at a time to pass.

20 November 1914

General Sir Arthur Barrett, commanding the 6th (Poona) Division, received news from a local Arab sheikh that the Turks had withdrawn and abandoned Basrah. Two battalions (104th Wellesley's Rifles and 117th Mahrattas) embarked immediately and sailed to Basrah.

After their retreat from Basrah, the Turks took up a position where they could make a stand against a further British advance. The best position was at Qurna.

Basrah is a city on the River Euphrates, inland from where the river flows into the head of the Persian Gulf. In 1914 it had a population of 60,000, of a mixture of Christians and Muslims. The city is an island, cut off from the mainland when the rivers flood. Land communications were most difficult, with few roads along the banks of the rivers and none inland.

21 November 1914

104th Wellesley's Rifles and 117th Mahrattas entered Basrah in the evening. The British officially took possession of the city on 23 November. In this action the British secured oil supplies in the Middle East: this had immense strategic implications, as this oil field supplied most of the Royal Navy's fuel. To the Turks, the loss of Basrah caused more loss of face than strategic damage.

The capture of Qurna, 3- 19 December 1914

Qurna lies at the confluence of the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates, where they join to become the Shatt-al-Arab 40 miles above Basrah. It is the legendary site of the Garden of Eden.

3 December 1914

A small force of two and a half Indian infantry battalions embarked and sailed upstream. They disembarked 3 miles downstream of Qurna and found themselves in a fire-fight that had broken out between Turk defence's on-shore and the gunboats carrying the infantry.

Uncompleted trenches gave the Turkish defenders little cover and gradually the British force advanced towards Qurna. Once they gained the bank of the Tigris across from the village, no further advance could be made due to a hail of Turkish bullets from the opposite bank a quarter of a mile away. The British were forced to retire to the landing point.

6 December 1914

No further attempt was made until reinforcements arrived at dawn on the 6th, when the infantry was made up to five battalions, with some mountain gun batteries also arriving. In the interim, the Turks had advanced across the Tigris and were now on the same bank. Consequently when the British tried to advance they had to fight again through the same date groves as before. Eventually, while the enemy troops in Qurna came under fire from Royal Navy vessels on the Euphrates, an Indian Army Sepoy (Private) managed to swim the wide Tigris and take a line across. More men joined him, and a wire hawser was dragged across. This became the basis for a ferry, and troops began to cross.



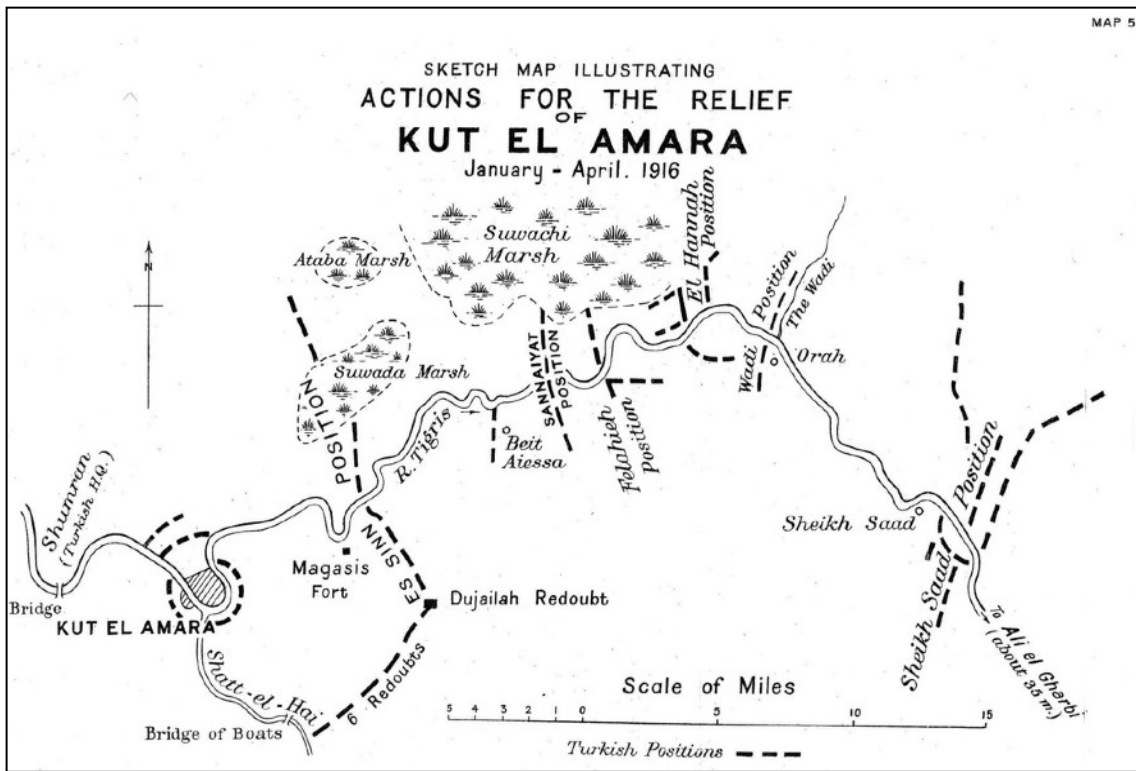
Before the Turks in Qurna knew what was happening, the infantry had encircled the town. The Turkish garrison surrendered. 42 Turkish officers and over 1000 men were captured. The oil installations at Basrah were made completely safe by this action. Unfortunately the relative ease with which the Turks were defeated at Qurna led the British and Indian leadership to believe that further advances would be equally cheap. British losses at Qurna were a little over 300; the Turks lost around 1500.

1915 - Saw some tactical moves by the British to seize important or threatening points beyond Basra. After an early string of cheap successes, eyes increasingly fell on the lure of the Mesopotamian capital, Baghdad. The 6th (Poona) Division advanced upriver, leaving a very thinly stretched supply line of hundreds of miles behind it, only to receive a bloody repulse at Ctesiphon. A ragged and dispiriting retreat back to Kut-al-Amara began.

- The Turkish attempts to recapture Basra (11 - 14 April 1915).
- The Capture of Nasiriyeh (27 June - 24 July 1915)
- The first advance on Baghdad (including the Capture of Kut-al-Amara) (12 September - 7 October 1915)
- The Battle of Ctesiphon (22 - 24 November 1915)
- The retreat to Kut-al-Amara (25 November - 3 December 1915)

1916 – The siege of Kut-al-Amara (7 December 1915 - 29 April 1916)

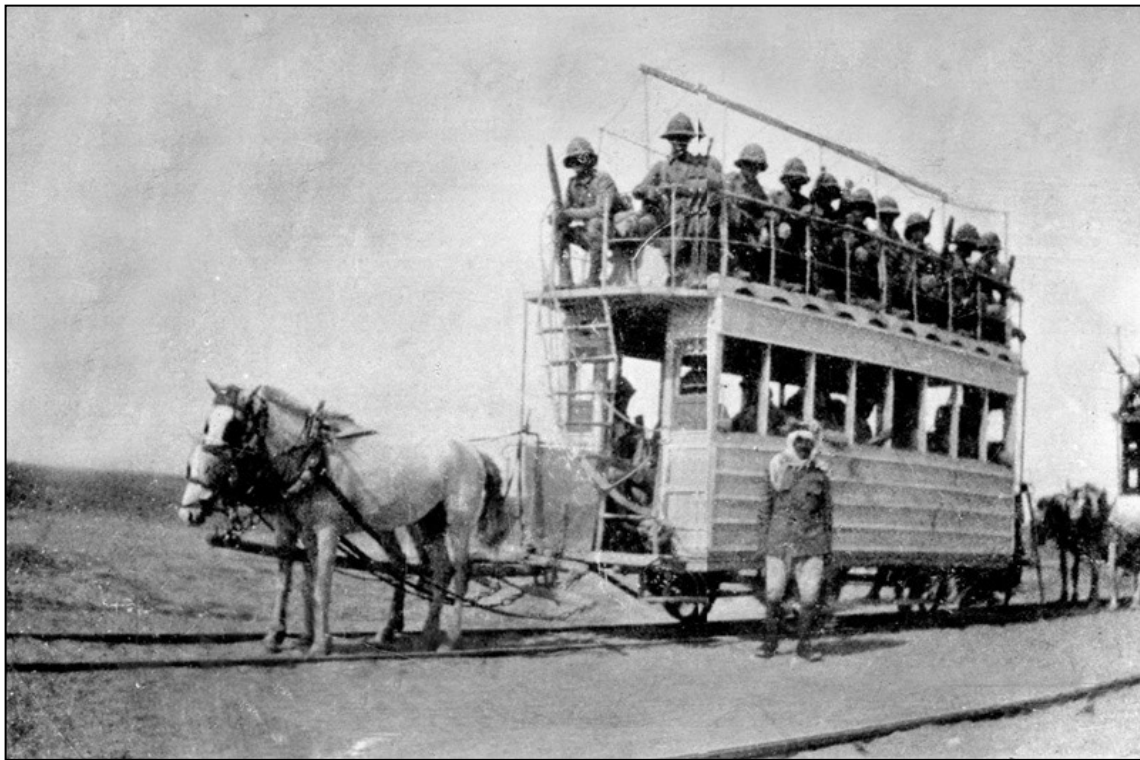
- The efforts to relieve Kut
 - The Battle of Sheik Sa'ad (7 January 1916)
 - The Battle of the Wadi (13 January 1916)
 - The Battle of the Hanna (21 January 1916)
 - The Attack on the Dujailah Redoubt (7 - 9 March 1916)
 - The Battles of the Hanna and Fallahiyeh (5 - 8 April 1916)
 - The Battles of Bait Aisa and Sannaiyat (7 - 22 April 1916)



The Turks pursued the retreating 6th (Poona) Division to Kut, and soon surrounded and cut it off. British forces in Mesopotamia were now growing, the arrival of the experienced 3rd (Lahore), 7th (Meerut) and 13th (Western) Divisions bringing a significant increase in strength. These formations were ordered to advance north along the Tigris to relieve Kut.



Turkish troops on their way to Kut on 7 December 1915



Troops on the way to relieve Kut in 1916

They ran into strong and stoutly defended lines and suffered some hard knocks; although they got close to Kut, the garrison there was surrendered on 29 April 1916. It was an enormous blow to British prestige and a morale-booster for the Turkish Army. It is worth recording that some 23,000 men had been killed or wounded in the various attempts to rescue a garrison half the size of that holding Kut.

The culminating tragedy, the Battle of Es Sinn (Dujailah Redoubt) could have offered some compensation in the successful relief of Kut and the probable capture of Baghdad, but this, almost the last opportunity, was thrown away because of incompetent generalship.

The final attempt to relieve Kut took place on 22 April at the battle of Sannaiyet. Following a two-day bombardment, the 7th Division was limited to an attack by only one brigade, because the frontage was restricted by floods.

A composite Highland battalion of the 19th Brigade penetrated the first and second line with extraordinary bravery, but the support brigades failed to reinforce them.

The ground had become boggy with the shell fire and the Turkish machine-guns mowed them down in the mud. On their right no progress was made by the 3rd and 13th Divisions and in the 7th Division alone there were 1,100 casualties.

Six days before the surrender on 23 April 1916 General Townshend finally realised the extent of the disaster that was about to engulf his force. He cabled General Lake with the proposal that he should offer a huge bribe to the Turks at allow the garrison to move back to Basra, on a strict parole that none should be involved in fighting the Turks for the remainder of the war. They would instead have returned to garrison duties in India.

In a muddled and panicky state of mind he cabled - *"the Turks have no money to pay for my force in captivity. The force would all perish from weakness or be shot by the Arabs if they had to march to Baghdad and the Turks have no ships to carry us there. Let the parole be given, not to fight the Turks only. During negotiations no doubt the Turks would permit of your sending ships up with*

food. The men will be so weak in three- or four-days time that they will be incapable of all exertion and the stench in Kut are such that I am afraid pestilence may break out at any time.

Money might easily settle the question of getting us off without parole being given and it would be a great thing. The defence has been spoken to me by Khalid in the highest terms. Your decision must reach me if you act quickly. It would take me three days to destroy the guns and ammo which I should have to do before I came away if you negotiate."

Nothing reveals more clearly the state of mind of the General who was very largely responsible for locking up his forces in the first place and who had little idea of the insuperable problems and huge casualties that would result.

After the siege of 147 days, Townshend surrendered Kut on 29 April 1916. The following day 277 British and 204 Indian Officers, together with 2,592 British and 6,988 Indian other ranks were taken into captivity, together with 3,248 Indian non-combatants. The offer of one million pounds in gold, the following day they raised to two million, was rejected.

Approximately 345 badly wounded or sick men (mainly Indians) were exchanged for Turkish prisoners and sent down to Basra. For the remainder, the chances of survival were low. Of the 2,592 British Troops captured at Kut, about 1,750 died on the march or later in the camps and of the 6,988 Indian troops, about 2,500 died in similar fashion.

The siege had begun on 4 December and the Allied garrison held out, fighting against malaria and starvation, waiting for the arrival of a British relief column.

The Turks wanted a complete victory, to once again, after their recent victory in Gallipoli, demonstrate to the world their superiority over the forces of the British Empire.

A month earlier Kitchener, with his mind ever focussed on the need to preserve the Empire and indeed to ultimately expand it following the defeat of Turkey by annexing new territories in the Middle East, had cabled General Lake *"I sincerely hope that it is fully realised by you and all the general officers under your command that it would be ever a disgrace to our country if Townshend should surrender. Our prestige in the East would be gravely prejudiced by such a disaster."*

And so it proved. For the Turks, the success at Kut was a tremendous moral victory. They had demonstrated that the all-powerful and all-conquering British Raj was a myth. While the British, as we have seen, offered the Turks two million in gold in exchange for repatriation of the garrison, the Turks turned down the offer. Instead they used the POW's as propaganda.

The Turks paraded the British prisoners through the streets of Baghdad and other towns in the empire, where their subjects could revile, stone and spit on the hated English. This public taunting of the proud British imperialists carried an important message: the British could be humbled, degraded and enslaved. The defeat at Kut marked an important step towards the collapse of the British Empire.

On the 25 April, Kitchener realised all was lost. If an attempt to send a supply ship failed, he authorised negotiations. There was little else he could do.

Kitchener stressed a few bargaining points that Lake and Townshend might follow; the Russians were pressing towards Baghdad, Turkish supplies must be low, money for the bribe was available. Finally, he could make available another 2000 troops with a further 3000 for further operations at a future date. These were hollow threats to Khalid, exalting in his victory.

THE DEATH MARCH OF THE BRITISH GARRISON OF KUT



General Townshend and Khalil Pasha after the surrender.

For the British and Indian troops the nightmare began. On 6 May 1916, the Turks began the 1,200-mile forced march of the British and Indian prisoners across the Syrian Desert from Kut. Mounted Arab and Kurdish guards prodded over 2,500 British soldiers with rifle butts and whips on the long death march.

Starvation, thirst, disease and exhaustion thinned out the British column and only 837 soldiers survived the march and the years in captivity. Turkish treatment of the Indian troops was better as they attempted to attract fellow Muslims to their cause.

During the siege, the Turks had attempted to inspire mutiny among the Indian forces in Kut by leaving bundles of propaganda pamphlets along the barbed-wire front lines calling the Indians to murder their British officers and join the Sultan's forces. While the British attempted to intercept these pamphlets, some did get through and led to a number of desertions.

In general, the Turks, did not follow Western rules and regulations in dealing with war prisoners. The Western press described in detail the atrocities faced by Allied (especially British) POW's.

Captured soldiers were herded like sheep by mounted Arab troopers, who freely used sticks and whips to keep stragglers marching. Food was very scarce and the POW's rarely had access to fresh water. The desert climate where most campaigning took place had a debilitating impact on prisoners, especially the heat and dust.

Often Turkish troops and guards relieved captives of their water bottles, boots and uniforms, leaving the POW's in an assortment of rags, and Ottoman officers exercised very little control over their men.

Although the Army and press hushed it up, there were widespread rumours that many of the prisoners, particularly younger, fairer men, had been repeatedly raped.

When prisoners collapsed exhausted, starved, or ill, many were left to fend for themselves in hovels. These mud-walled “shelters” were often filled with vermin and soldiers had to resort to begging from passing Arabs for scraps of food. Many of these invalids were robbed, stripped of their last clothing and left to die.

After marching across the desert, the remaining POW’s entered prison camps where they received insufficient food and faced epidemics of dysentery, cholera and malaria.

Many prisoners were simply incarcerated in regular jails with common criminals, without regard for rank or status. Prisoners sat in bare cells filled with vermin, few washing facilities and no physical exercise.

From official records, the Official History of the War and various books written up to the present day, it is possible to try and piece together something of the more detailed sufferings of Privates Frederick William Davey and Frank Turner, both of whom had been transferred from the 6th Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment to the 2nd Battalion the Dorset’s.

The clues are slender. During the siege, the 2nd Dorset’s had lost 3 officers and 32 men killed or died of wounds, 2 officers and 40 men wounded and 7 men who died of disease. 12 officers and approximately 350 men went into captivity.

All the officers survived, but only about 70 Dorset men returned home after the armistice, while a further 100 names appear in the official records as ‘reported died while prisoner of war.’ For the rest, nothing definite is known.

The Commonwealth War Graves data-base records that Frederick William Davey died on 7 August 1916 and has a marked grave in the Baghdad war Cemetery. This gives some possibility that Davey did indeed die in Baghdad although bodies were brought into this central collecting cemetery from many other areas.

By contrast, Frank Turner is recorded as having died on 30 September 1916, with no indication of a location and his name is commemorated on the Basra Memorial. A photograph appeared in the Western Morning News announcing Frederick Davey’s death. ‘Private Fred Davey of Winkleigh, who died in Mesopotamia. He was with the Kut garrison which surrendered and died on the march from Kut to Mosul.’ This certainly seems to indicate that Davey reached no further than Mosul and then remained there.

It was an eight mile march to the first collecting point at Shumran for those prisoners who were unlucky enough not to be transported there by boat from Kut. For the emaciated men of the 16th and 17th Brigades, which included the Dorset’s, the effort was almost too much, and men began to die.

On arrival on the open space by the river, without any form of shelter or bedding, they were issued a ration of two and a half Turkish biscuits per man.

The guards were trading anything else that was available, for money, pieces of clothing, even boots to those too famished to last out. The biscuits seemingly made of husks and earth was far too hard to eat without soaking in the polluted river.

Some of those who tried, on famished empty stomachs died as a result. Cholera and dysentery were rife and within the first 24 hours of captivity, the total death toll exceeded 100. A few sick

and wounded, mainly Indian prisoners, were exchanged for fit Turkish prisoners, an operation that was completed by 8 May.

They went down river on the ill-fated 'Julnar', the boat that just before the ending of the siege had attempted to run through the Turkish lines to bring supplies of food into Kut. It had been captured by the Turks who had stretched a boom across the river.

On 1 May, the Turks had allowed a British ship with food barges attached, to reach Shumran and a ration of biscuit, bully-beef, jam, condensed milk and sugar was issued in chaotic scenes of heat, dust, smells and lack of any sanitary facilities. Some got nothing.

On 4 May the first echelon of officers left Shumran for Baghdad on the steam-tug 'Basrah' which had also brought up some mail. The officers were most unwilling to leave their men to their fate and few senior staff did indeed manage to remain.

Townshend and his staff, of course were given an even more comfortable passage to Baghdad; he was indeed treated as an 'honoured guest' of the Turks.

Two days later, on 6 May a second consignment of stores arrived for the remaining officers and men, including butter, condensed milk, biscuits, cake and puddings. There was, however, little time allowed for the distribution, and much was wasted.

On 6 May and with extreme cruelty, the death march of the British and Indian prisoners began, the first party staggering into Baghdad on 17 May.

Some remained too weak or ill to move further; the majority were pushed on to POW camps in Anatolia. By 2pm on 6 May, over 300 men had already died, and all the remainder were formed up ready to leave camp to begin an atrocious march up river to Baghdad, with those who lagged behind being beaten with whips, batons and rifle butts or simply left to die stripped of clothing at the hands of murderous Arabs.

Before leaving on 4 May, General Delamain had arranged for the sick to be carried by donkey or camel for the first 15 miles to Baghailah, reached on 8 May for a two-day halt. 200 of these men were left there to be picked up by ship, but many had died having fallen off the animals and been murdered and more died on arrival, before embarkation was possible.

Neither they nor the exhausted majority were given water; 6 biscuits and a handful of dates were issued as a ration for three days. After 36 hours in camp at Baghailah, there was a further distribution of a few mouldy chapattis, with more sold by the Arabs at 3 for 1 rupee (10 times the cost).

By slow stages the head of the column reached Baghdad by 17 May eleven days after leaving Shumran. Medical staff had left Shumran by boat on 10 May and on arrival in Baghdad were able to remain in order to set up a primitive hospital and 'convalescent camp' to hold some of the sick and wounded until they either died or were moved on to follow the main body on their march into Anatolia.

Eleven British medical officers remained in Baghdad disgusted with the poor sanitation and the state of the Turkish medical services, but were helped by Mr. Brissell the American Consul and a group of French nuns.

For months, Mr. Brissell organised the work of the American Red Cross Society, evacuating 123 men and 22 officers and organising Christian burials for the dead. Cholera, dysentery and typhoid were rife. Mr. Brissell himself died of cholera, still negotiating the exchange of prisoners.

With the 'hospital' closed, the men set off for Samara in forty man open trucks containing 70 men, but after two hours the men were forced to begin the march again, reaching Samara where they stayed for three days. Those who could not move on were left to die.

Some were taken into a nearby Turkish hospital, thanks to money collected by the officers to provide them with some food. The rations there consisted of an issue of two handfuls of flour with one of wheat and a spoonful of ghee with salt, this to last three days. Sometimes there was a meat ration, one goat between 400 men.

Frederick Davey's death was recorded on 7 August, and he has a known grave in Baghdad, which does give rise to the possibility that he had remained in hospital in Baghdad for some two months, or perhaps he had reached Samara where he was hospitalized. On the other hand, if as reported in the newspaper he died 'on the march from Kut to Mosul,' it is possible that he had fallen out during the march and been 'hospitalized' in some other squalid accommodation where his death was recorded.

Perhaps both these possibilities could have occurred; some time spent in Baghdad, a kind of recovery and then sent out in early August only to die on the way. After the war, bodies were certainly collected up and brought back to the Baghdad military cemetery for burial.

Leaving on 15 May, some 375 officers struggled on for a march of 200 miles towards Mosul. They passed through Tikrit, Kharinina, Wadi Khanana and Shergat, far better treated of course than the rank and file, sharing donkeys and with better rations.

On 23 May the majority of the men, some 3,000 British and Indians, set off from Samara to begin the next stage of their journey, a much more terrible long march from Baghdad to Mosul via Tikrit, escorted with extreme brutality by the lowest class of Arab, with many men dropping off on the way, often to die either murdered or simply abandoned to their fate.

The head of the column reached Mosul on 3 June and in the days that followed the remaining survivors struggled in. On 29 May a second column was dispatched, following the right bank of the Tigris, also reaching Tikrit and then moving on to Mosul. There is evidence of the way some of the sick and wounded who fell out on the way were treated.

At Tikrit, the main stopping place on the way to Mosul, 192 Indian and 43 British other ranks were found by medical staff officers lying in dirty mud houses after having spent days lying on the river bank. They were suffering from dysentery, enteritis and starvation.

They had been given nothing but coarse bread to eat, there were no medical supplies or even blankets and all had lost their boots. On 13 June 50 Indian and 26 British other ranks were found at Shergat lying by the river, with one assistant surgeon to care for them.

Meanwhile on the march, fights often broke out between the Indian camp followers and British troops over the theft of clothing, food and blankets. Any man too weak to walk further or who was injured and fell out was murdered in barbaric ways by the Arabs.

The march from Baghdad to Mosul was particularly awful for the sick because the guards insisted that they must also walk; the donkeys that were provided were ridden instead by the guards, who

also stole boots and clothing, leaving many men with nothing more than strips of blanket on their feet.

Once at Mosul an attempt was made to collect the sick and wounded where at last they were comparatively well cared for in the local hospitals. Others went to an old infantry barracks and starved on the inedible Turkish bread, the majority dying of dysentery.

From Mosul, a first group of some 350 remaining British and Indian other ranks set off on a 200 mile march across the desert to the rail-head at Raas-el-Ain, having been separated into groups under the command of an Arab officer, who usually took no notice of thieving by the guards.

Other groups followed. A typical example was a group of 1,700 men with only 7 camels and 12 donkeys to carry the sick.

The march to Raas-el-Ain was via Dolabia, Rumailan Kabir, Nisibin and Kochisar. Smaller hospitals were found en route; there is evidence that at Nisibin 100 patients were found without medical help, with water issued twice a day but with no receptacles to drink it from and dysentery rife.

In this instance, Germans (who despised the Turks as much as did the British and often came to the aid of the British prisoners if it was possible) gave some relief, securing a ration of two teacups of cooked wheat and rice with two chapattis per day per man.

Further relief was given at Raas-el-Ain, each prisoner being given a 2lb loaf of course bread for 48 hours. From there the journey continued by train, 40 men per open wagon, with many suffering from dysentery.

The next stop was Islahie, where nothing more than a few pomegranates could be issued before moving on to Mamouri reached on 23 June. Here we know that a hospital camp was established for 90 men of the 16th and 17th Brigades, housed in Arab tents.

The tents were one mile from the road, the patients cared for by a single assistant surgeon, with virtually no food available. The following day another group of the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry were found at Hassan Begli (in the Taurus Mountains) in similar condition.

At the Raas-el-Ain railhead the other ranks were crowded into closed railway wagons with an average of 40 sick and dying men in each. Forced to sit on each other in spite of the dysentery, the wagons remained sealed until the following day when they reached Islahie.

The final destination of the 16th Brigade (including the Dorsets) and the 17th Brigade and very possibly where Frederick Turner died, was Bagtsche where the prisoners were working on the mountainous section of the Constantinople to Baghdad railway.

Their food consisted of black bread, beans, rice and a little meat. The hours of work were 4.30am to 11am in the morning and 1pm to 6pm in the afternoon. Good workers were given six or seven piastres a day but the cost of their meals was deducted from this.

R.Q.M.S. Harvey of the 2nd Dorsets survived the march. Arriving at camp he reported what was left of the Battalion.

He wrote: *"It was a terrible surprise to even myself when I answered 140. We had left Kut over 300 strong. The balance had been left mostly on the road either dead or dying and among the 140*

who remained, was not one fit man. All were practically skeletons, while many were fit to die with dysentery and various other complaints”

The Official History of the 2nd Dorsets relates:

When the last survivors did arrive at their destination they were almost without exception put to work on the railway or some similar task and kept hard at it on inadequate rations, under unsanitary conditions, herded together in the filthiest quarters and frequently treated with the utmost brutality. The vast majority of the men taken at Kut had perished of their privations and ill-usage long before the armistice.

The meagre existence at Bagtsche did not last, as the prisoners became weaker and weaker, incapable of any work.

They were moved on again during September to camps further inland, most to Afion, but the dreadful conditions continued.

By November 1918 approximately 50% of the other ranks had died by the end of 1916 and 50% of the remainder were to die in prison camps.

The survival of the remainder was due in no small measure to the work of the Regimental Care Committees sending parcels of food and clothing to the camps. On 26 July 1916, for example, Dorchester’s population organised a ‘Kut Day’ to raise funds.

By the end of the year, Dorchester, Weymouth and Bridport had raised £1,602 for comforts and supplies. Not all the parcels arrived of course, but they helped considerably to improve the prisoner’s conditions and even to discover the location of many of the men, some of whom were feared dead.

Sadly, neither Fred Davey nor Frank Turner had survived, but by 1918 with increased medical help, conditions were improving, with enough clothing, food and money to remain alive.

The vile treatment of the Kut prisoners deserves total condemnation, but as Colonel Spackman of the Indian Medical Services subsequently wrote:

‘The disaster that befell the British prisoners in Turkey cannot really be blamed on individuals. It stemmed from the inability of the Turkish High Command to foresee the inadequacy of their civil and military administration to feed and transport so large a body of men of whose deteriorated physical condition they had been warned.’

To this, one should add the Turkish officer’s attitude to other ranks including their own troops as well as their prisoners and the employment of the vilest impoverished Arabs as guards on the long marches.

In November 1918, the official British report declared that 3,290 British and Indian POW’s from Kut-el-Amara had died in Turkish captivity, while an additional 2,222 were missing and presumed dead.

1917 - Lessons were learned. Following the fall of Kut, the British ordered Major-General Stanley Maude to take command of the British army in Mesopotamia. He introduced new methods, which culminated in a decisive defeat of the Turks in February and capture of Baghdad in March 1917.

On this day, the Berlin-Baghdad railway was captured, and German schemes for Turkey were finished. Given the continually depressing news in France and elsewhere, this was a significant and newsworthy achievement.

British forces (and Russians, advancing from the north and east) closed in on the Turks throughout the autumn of 1917, and into the spring of 1918. Despite making great advances, however, and the additional pressure coming from the north-west where British forces in Palestine defeated the Turks, no *decisive* victory was gained.

- The Battle of Mohammed Abdul Hassan (9 January 1917)
- The Battles of the Hai Salient, Dahra Bend and the Shumran Peninsula (11 January - 24 February 1917)
- The Capture of Baghdad (11 March 1917)
- The Battle of Istabulat (21 April 1917)
- The Battle of 'The Boot' at Band-i-Adhaim (30 April 1917)
- The Battle of Tikrit (5 November 1917)

1918 - The Action of Khan Baghdadi (26 March 1918) - Turkey signs Armistice (1 October 1918).

The cost

Like Gallipoli, conditions in Mesopotamia defy description. Extremes of temperature (120 degrees F was common); arid desert and regular flooding; flies, mosquitoes and other vermin: all led to appalling levels of sickness and death through disease.

Under these incredible conditions, units fell short of officers and men, and all too often the reinforcements were half-trained and ill-equipped. Medical arrangements were quite shocking, with wounded men spending up to two weeks on boats before reaching any kind of hospital.

These factors, plus of course the unexpectedly determined Turkish resistance, contributed to high casualty rates.

- 11012 killed
- 3985 died of wounds
- 12678 died of sickness
- 13492 missing and prisoners (9000 at Kut)
- 51836 wounded
- data from "Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire"



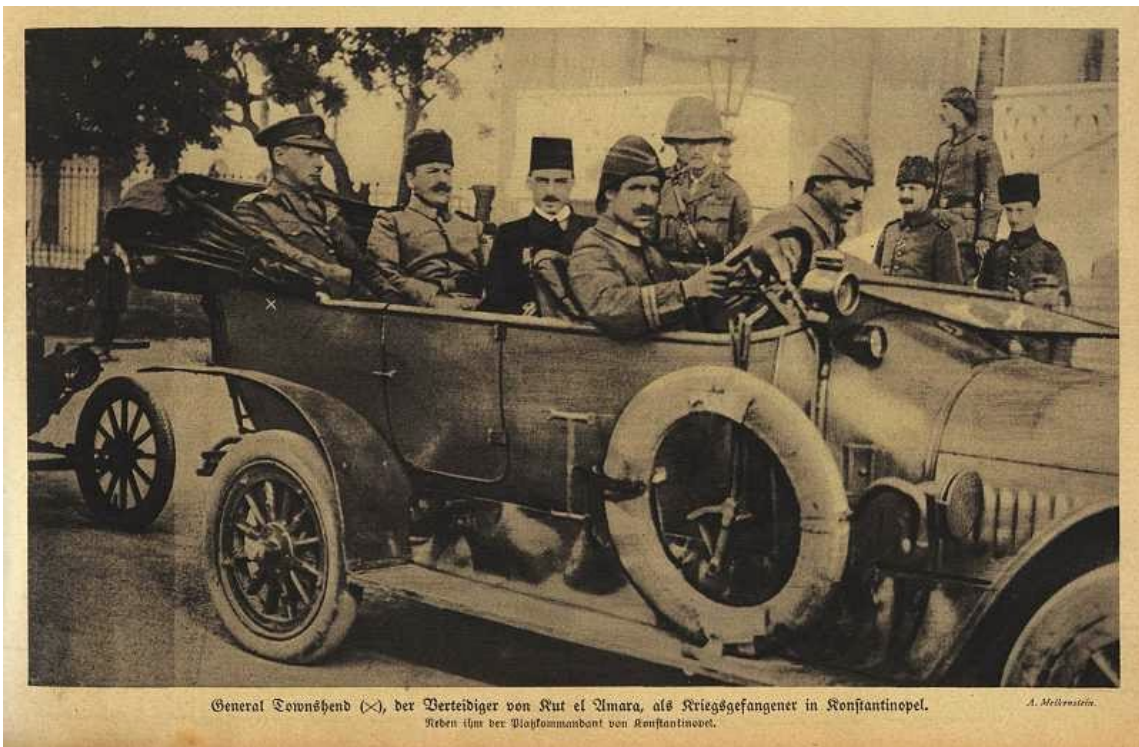
Wireless station receiving the last message from Kut in 1916

The siege of Kut-al-Amara continues, as do British attempts to relieve their trapped comrades. General Gorringe leads the relief force. After a series of failed attempts to break through Turkish lines, Gorringe's force is much depleted.

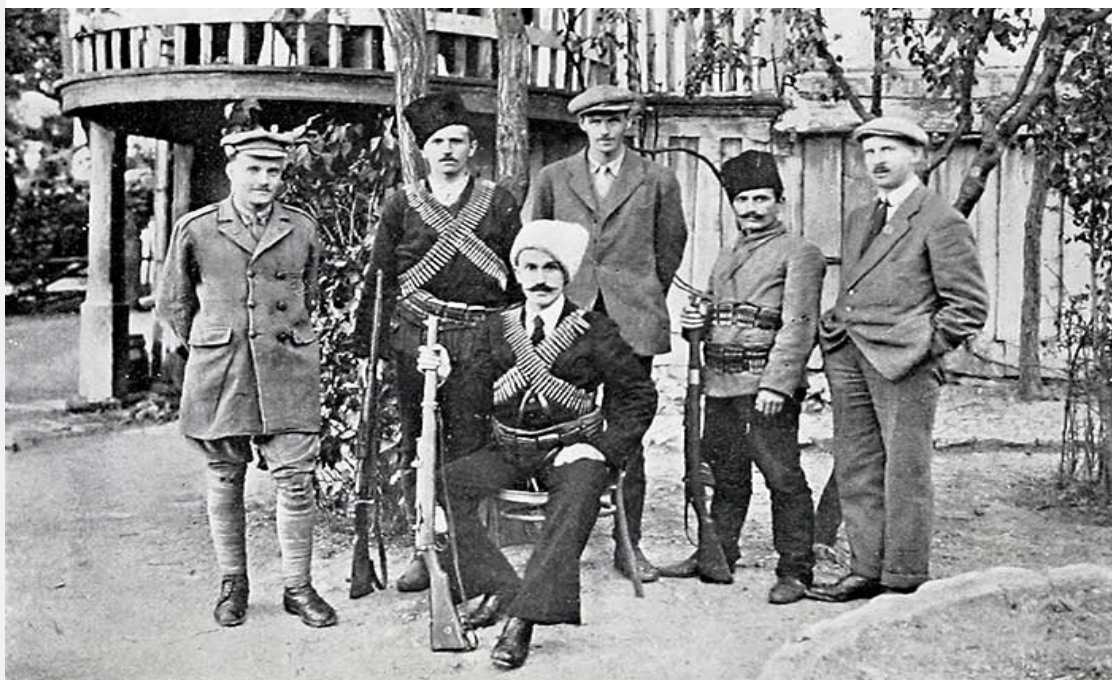
Reinforcements are on their way but Gorringe knows that the situation in Kut is now desperate; the starving defenders have no time to wait for his reinforcements. He needs to raise the siege now or the men of Kut will have to surrender.

So Gorringe launches one last desperate attempt to force a way through the Turks to relieve Kut. He attacks at Sannaiyat, on the north bank of the Tigris. Gorringe tried unsuccessfully to break through here earlier in the month.

Now history repeats itself. The fighting is bloody, with both sides taking heavy casualties, but Gorringe's men are unable to dislodge the Turks. This is the end. Gorringe's men have suffered too much and are too demoralised to make any further attempt to raise the siege of Kut. There are 13,000 men trapped in the Mesopotamian town; the British have taken more than 23,000 casualties in their attempts to rescue them.



General Townshend is driven away in custody after the surrender as 'guest' of the Turkish Army.



General Townshend now a (prisoner) guest of Khalil Pasha.