Home

VOICES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR: MESOPOTAMIA

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The entry of the Ottoman Empire into the First World War in October 1914 threatened British interests in the Middle East. The British government decided to send troops to Mesopotamia – present-day Iraq – to protect the valuable oil fields near Basra. A British and Indian assault force landed there in November and achieved early successes against the Turkish troops of the Ottoman Empire, capturing first Basra and then Qurna. British gunner Jack Callaway described the Battle of Qurna, which took place in December 1914.

Well we opened up and cleared the village of course and it was burned down. The Turks were cleared back but we withdrew, because there was no intention to hold it at that time. And they were 15-pounder guns they had, the Turks, very old type and not much of a worry really! It was all sort of excitement really, in a sense; I don't know, not knowing what was to happen, of course. Infantry would be a bit different for them, especially advancing in open desert which is not very funny.

The Battle of Nasiriya in July 1915 was another defeat for the Turks. British officer George Channer was in command of eight machine guns during his battalion's advance.

We'd had to advance – the men had had to advance – through fairly good cover, through long grass, and by 12 o'clock they'd advance about 400 yards. At the end of that I remember seeing a small body of Ghurkhas – about seven being led by another – making for a trench which was about 300 yards in front of me. So I gave them covering fire, and at that moment the whole of our front became alive; the Hampshires on the right I could see in the palm trees. They advanced to the enemy position and these got out of their trenches and bolted backwards, back to Nasiriya. And that was the end of the battle.

Henry Shortt was a medical officer attached to the 33rd Indian Cavalry Regiment and arrived in Mesopotamia in late 1914. He remembered an early encounter with Turkish troops, and the surprising ease of fighting them.

I saw one Turk firing at us from behind a bush. I jumped off my horse, threw the reigns to my orderly and seized hold of this man's rifle. And we had a tug of war; I was only using one hand as I had a revolver in the other! And suddenly a blinding flash in my face, didn't know what it was – temporarily blinded. As soon as I could see, I had a hold of the Turk's rifle; he was lying on the ground. I could've shot him but I didn't because he was unarmed, then we let him go. Major Anderson, when I re-joined the rest, he said he was astonished how easily his sword had gone through a Turk. He said it was just like going through butter! He was so astonished.

The Allies were lulled into a false sense of security by their early victories and thought themselves militarily superior to the Turks. Spurred on by this, they overstretched their already precarious supply lines by pushing on towards the Mesopotamian capital, Baghdad. Near the ancient city of Ctesiphon in November 1915, the 6th Indian Division – which included Private F Finch – suffered a sobering defeat.

At about 20 November, we had orders to advance onto Ctesiphon. Our brigade was on the left of the division. We marched along in ordinary formation – fours – I suppose, until about eight o'clock in the morning. We'd had a very cold, horrible night, frozen; I don't think anybody had a sleep because it was so cold. We was very pleased when the reveille or the sound to come and we started on the march. We went along, we opened out, we couldn't see anybody but we opened out, I suppose the forces that be, the generals, might have seen the enemy, or thought they did, but we opened out in platoon formation, opened but not in battle formation. At about eight o'clock we halted. Had an idea that the enemy had gone; he wasn't occupying any position at all there. They sent a reconnoitring patrol out in the front and all of a sudden bang! bang! guns and everything they started to fire; those people, well they was mowed down.

The Allies sustained heavy casualties at Ctesiphon. They were forced to retreat to Kut, a town they had previously captured. George Channer was among them.

The casualties at Ctesiphon were very heavy. In my battalion we had over 35%; but in some regiments they had over 60; and we had not calculated for such heavy casualties. And so resources were very severely strained and were very inadequate. I remember seeing the wounded coming onto one of the steamers; they were coming along in army transport carts, they'd had rough field dressings put on them the night before and they were laid on the deck as we went down the river. General Townshend realised that his troops had been fought to a standstill during these three days. And so the retirement to Kut began.

Private R Hockaday of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment also took part in the retreat to Kut.

We had to turn around and make tracks over the same ground that we'd just come up. We had to retire on the flank which was very orderly at first, but the Turks were pushing us on very quickly and as we came on they were advancing more and more and we were getting a little bit out of disorder. Eventually we arrived at Kut. Kut was a very flat place, just like a table and we had to start digging in. The next day they were there shelling us and we had to dig our trenches everything under their shell fire and artillery fire and rifle fire and machine-gun fire. And I can tell you it made us work because the more you got down under the shelter the safer you were.

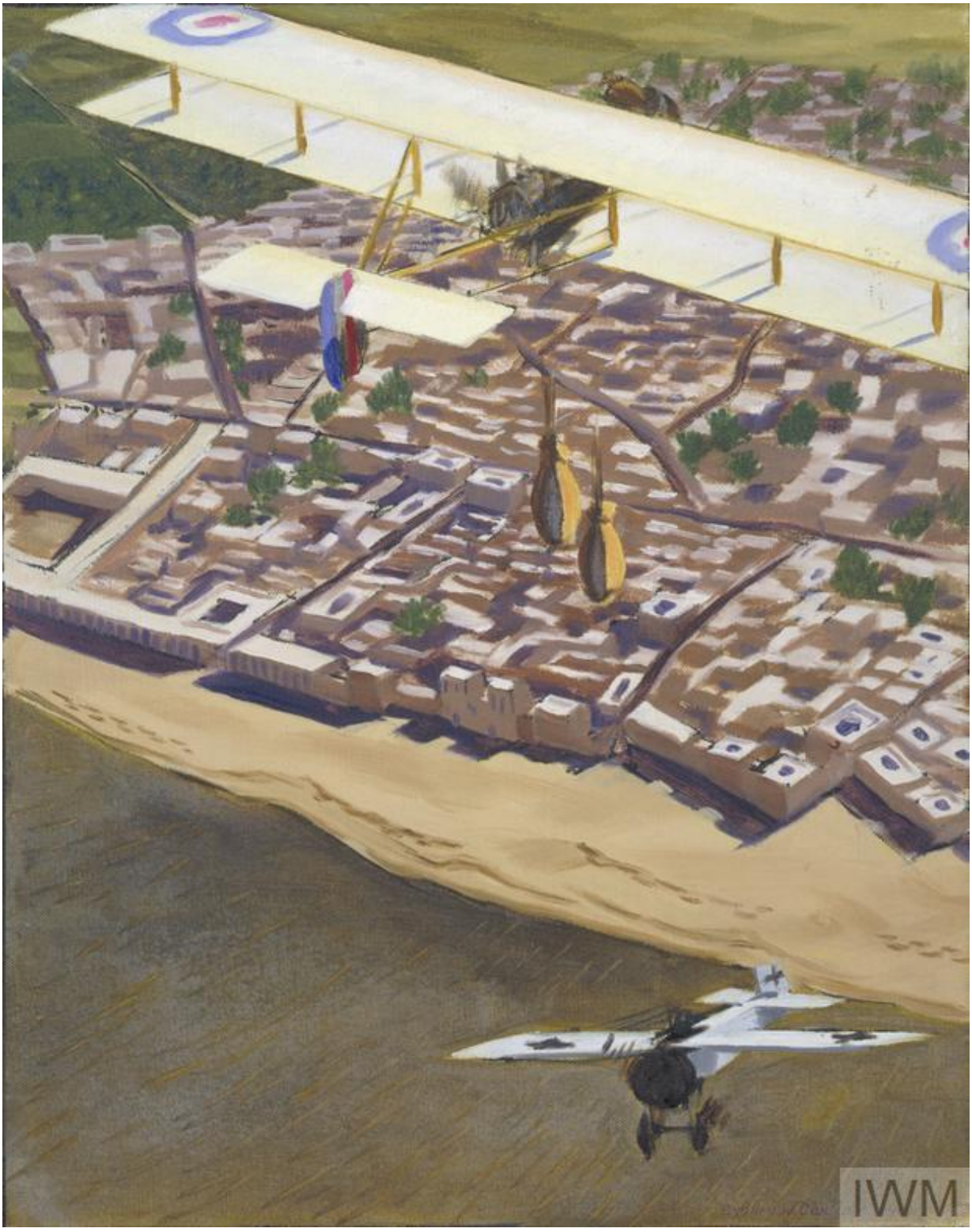
The exhausted 6th Division, commanded by Major General Charles Townshend, dug in at Kut and waited for reinforcements. From 7 December 1915, they were placed under siege by the Turks. Conditions in Kut steadily worsened, as British officer Henry Rich recalled.

We had seven weeks of plenty, followed by ten weeks of adequacy, gradually getting less and less, then finally we had four weeks of starvation which was complete hell. Townshend always thought he was going to be relieved within six weeks and he just used up his rations in that six weeks. And then after the relieving force had failed to get through he suddenly found out that by commandeering all the Arab food and piles of grain and using the mules he could hold out for another 84 days. But you hadn't got enough in your stomach and you get very tired of meat by itself, it tastes like a bit of chewed tin in the end. And four ounces of bread is about three small slices and that's got to last you twenty-four hours. By the time we got to the end, the bread was all barley with a lot of sweepings from where it had been stored and quite a bit of the stone

grindstones in it. The meat was good; there's no doubt that mule is quite good – better than horse.

Private Hockaday witnessed first-hand the effect inadequate rationing had on his comrades.

And as time went on we had to reduce our rations. Well, as time went on people began to get weak and dying a bit, you know. You couldn't do anything while they were living, you know. After they were dead, you carried them out and buried them. But while they were living they had to just stay amongst you in the trenches.



'British Maurice Farman Attacked by a German Fokker While Dropping Sacks of Corn on Kut-el-Amara during the Siege of 1916,' by Sydney Carline. © IWM (Art.IWM ART 4628)

During the siege, British officer Humphrey De Verd Leigh helped air drop supplies into Kut.

When we were doing this food-dropping stunt into Kut we were carrying – I think I'm right in saying – three, er, four eighty-pound sacks of ghee or atta or rye or whatever it was, which was slung on the bomb-rack underneath, slung under with a sort of belly-band contraption. Well, we tried to do two trips a day; morning and evening – really it was too hot in the middle of the day, even for us. But we did morning and evening. And we kept at it quite hard for quite a time. They shot at you, of course, as you were going over. But they were pretty bad shots and they were nearly always low – fortunately.

In early January 1916, a British and Indian force under Lieutenant General Sir Fenton Aylmer moved through Mesopotamia with the aim of relieving the troops in Kut. Private Richard Bassett of the Devonshire Regiment described conditions as they started the march towards their objective.

We left Basra on a forced march to Orah which as the crow flies was roughly 230 miles, but the way that we did it – owing to the detours – was over 300 miles. Our first day gave us some idea of what was to happen. We were marching through mud up above our boots and we also in this march had to carry a full pack, which on average with the ammunition; rifle; pack; haversack; water bottle; entrenching tool – weighed somewhere around between 50 to 70 pounds.

In a series of attacks between January and April 1916, the relief force suffered heavy casualties and failed to dislodge the determined Turks surrounding Kut. British officer T Ainsworth took part in one such attempt.

After a few days delay we made another final attack to try and crack through these positions. We were now almost near our goal and it seemed we were bound to succeed. Again on the morning of the attack, bad weather hampered our movements but we still pushed forward. In one sector at least we got through to two lines of Turkish trenches, when we were halted by heavy machine gunners on our right and left. And the outcome of the attack was, I'm afraid, failure. We had to withdraw, we couldn't sustain the forward movement, and we were checked there and pinned down. Our casualties had been very heavy indeed and it soon became apparent that we were up against something much stronger than we had anticipated.

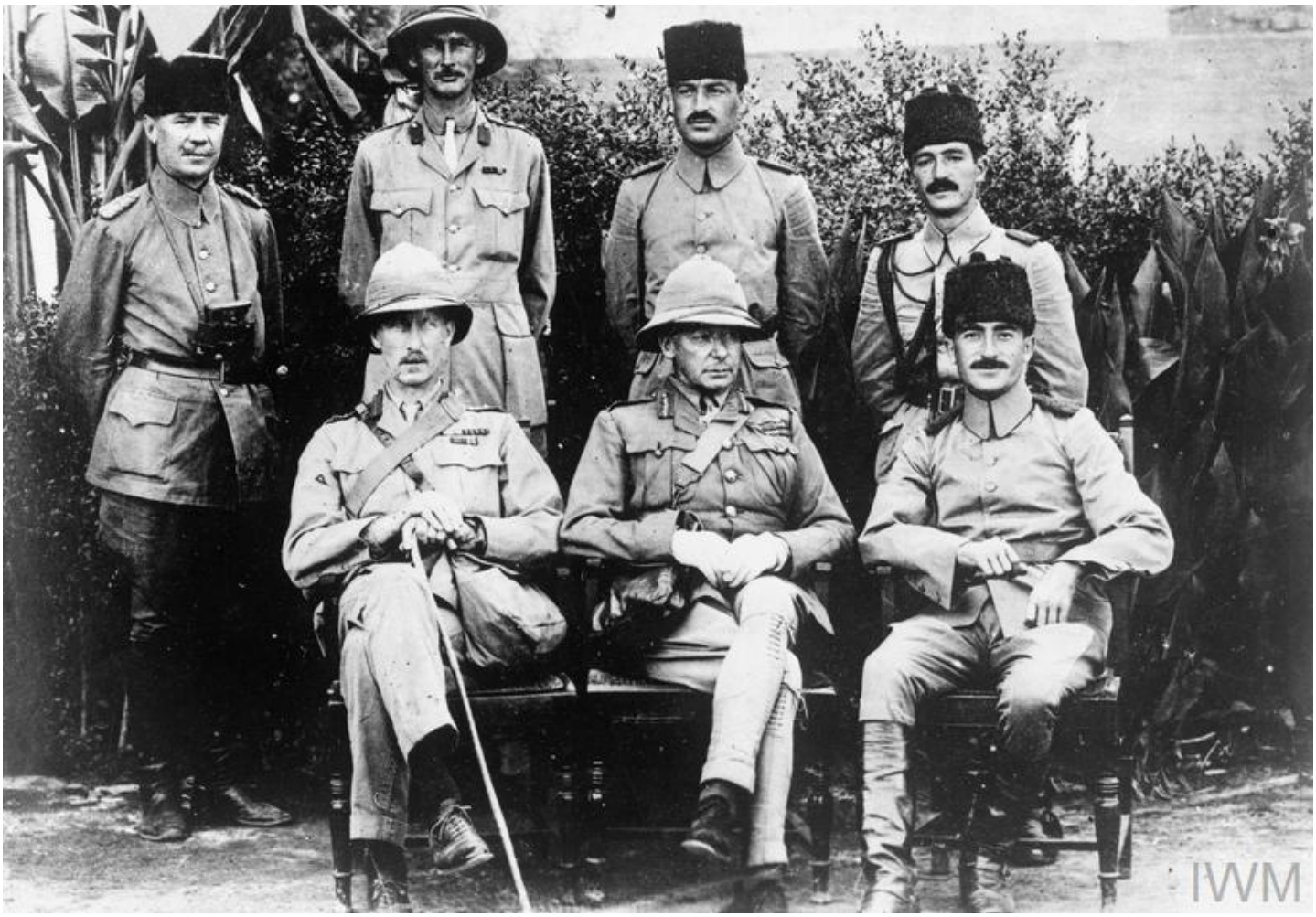
By the end of April 1916, the besieged troops could hold out no longer, and surrendered to the Turks on the 29th. Those still left alive were taken prisoner. Henry Rich recalled the events of that day.

The white flag went up about 11 o'clock so we then sat about and waited. And in due course a very well-disciplined Turkish regiment came in. They almost appeared to be slightly sorry for us. And then we sat about for the rest of the day, until in the late afternoon a Turkish steamer came along and took us up to the place where they were concentrating all the garrison at Kut, about eight miles up the river. And then we were told we were to march to Mosul and onwards. Transport would be provided, the transport was provided. I think it worked out at one small donkey per officer to carry ourselves and our kit – nothing for the men at all. So we marched off. Conditions really can be divided into two – officers and soldiers. The conditions for the officers were hard but no more than that; the conditions for the men were absolutely brutal and hellish.

Private Hockaday was just one of those who suffered this mistreatment.

For about a week they started to march us on to Baghdad which was about a hundred mile. There was no transport of anything to carry you or anything, just a few cavalry escorting us and that wasn't really Turks, it was all sorts dressed anyhow – Arabs and Kurds and everything. We were very weak at the time, and just to march along as best as we could. But all the time they were behind you, hammering you, hitting you on the back with a rifle and if you fell out otherwise you were left to lay and die if your comrades did not help you at all.

Following the humiliation of Kut's surrender, the British changed their tactics. Under the new leadership of Major-General Sir Stanley Maude, the tide began to turn against the Turks. In March 1917, Baghdad was finally captured, an event witnessed by British officer Joseph Napier.



General Charles Townshend, seated centre, shortly after the surrender of Kut. © IWM (Q 79344)

My company – I say mine, the one I was in, Staples commanded it – was on the right flank. We pushed the Turks – they made a slight attempt I'd forgotten on some mounds not far away. And then we moved up and found ourselves outside Baghdad on the Persian side, about half a mile outside the city on some big mounds out there. And we looked down into the town where we saw a lot of white flags up showing surrender and so on. And of course we realised that the town had fallen.

After Baghdad, the advance continued. British gunner Edgar Verrall fought in the Battle of Ramadi in September 1917 – one of a series of victories that year.

Well, all I can remember about the battle, we moved off rather late at night – we had the orders to dig in the guns up to the axles. And we dug in and we'd just about finished when we found out we was in the wrong position, so we had to come back and start digging in again. At daybreak we opened fire, we opened out early morning; it went on all day. We was firing for a while then we had the order to advance and we raced two or three miles round some cutting under fire. Then we stopped again, opened fire again. Then everything seemed quiet.

For the men fighting in Mesopotamia, it often meant adjusting to a different climate from the one they were used to. Glaswegian private Sibbald Stewart described his first impressions of the country on his arrival in 1917.

Looking at Basra from the water it was a lovely sight and the palm trees and the red sand and the glowing sun and all the different colours of the various costumes and fruit and clothes that they wore. It was really a lovely sight. But we got an awful drift of smell from the shore and it was far from beautiful! It wasn't a nice

smell at all – humanity and all dirt and everything. And mixed with all this there was the oil and smells from Abadan on the other side, the oil wells and everything, and it was far from nice.

The intense heat of the Middle East made life extremely difficult for the men who served there, such as Maurice Symes of the Somerset Light Infantry.

We were equipped for it with topis and back shields and all that kind of thing, see you had to dress for it but you couldn't go out in it. I'd seen 120 [degrees] in the shade one time. Anything you did, you did in the evening or the early morning – you could only lie about in the daytime really. We had marches and that in the morning, in fact quite long marches in the morning. We had a darned old colonel and he would insist on having these marches of several miles. Well then you'd be in for the day then – you couldn't go out after the sun got up. Horrible climate. But well I suppose now you've got more modern conveniences, electricity and fans and all the rest of it now, see, but we were just in hot sun.

The men's diet could also often leave a lot to be desired, as Australian Colin Sutherland, attached to the Royal Flying Corps, explained.

Food was, well, it was disgraceful that's what it was. Vegetables and that, well of course we couldn't get. But the Indian Government, they got potatoes and they dried them and ground them up and sent them up to us, to give us something. Well that was alright put in a stew. The only meat we got was sheep, mostly brought from India on the boats but there wasn't much of that. But we did get porridge in the winter. We got porridge and the oatmeal was weevilly. When you put the water on it, the weevils would come up to the top. Well you'd skim them off but still the taste was there! I couldn't stand it. Some of them they salted it, and that was alright.

Obtaining fresh water for large numbers of troops and animals as they moved around the dry and dusty country posed a problem, as Jack Callaway discovered during a six-week march to Amara.

We'd do about 15 miles a day, no more, and every time we would depend on water we had to depend on the marshes. It was marsh water all the way, and that was the worse we ever had. And I know when we were within reach of Amara by a day and half, the chaps sent some bellams, or canoes we called them, of fresh water down to us so that we were – we opened the pub as it were with fresh water after being six weeks on a marsh. Marsh water is terrible, the marsh water was foul. It had a smell with it, you know, terrible. It had to be filtered and all that carry on but it made no difference to the taste of it – terrible.

Officer Ian Macdonald recalled seeing mirages in the arid terrain, which can't have helped the thirsty men.

Once one had disembarked at al Amarah, there was also added mirage. Wherever you went, the mirage went on ahead. The effect is of an inviting stretch of water in a country where the only water is what is contained in the river bed and the occasional oasis.

The harsh Mesopotamian climate and terrain took a terrible toll on the troops' health, and large numbers died of disease. James Tolley, of the Royal Army Medical Corps, treated a range of afflictions.

They detailed me for duty the heat stroke cases – plenty of heat strokes, unconscious more or less. And you did what you could to try and relieve it you see. And I'd put them in a bath of water and then I used to put ice in the nape of the neck and in the groin. And as a last resort, they'd open up the brachial vein and let out the blood, you see. Sores – broke out in a lot of sores and all that kind thing caused by chiefly the bite of the insects, like, very bad. And I used to use red lotion and dress them I'd cut out a piece and I'd put that over the sore and then chuck a net over that again and cotton wool and bind it up, you see. And the sandfly fever that is a three day fever, you know, they'd get a terrible temperature. You'd reduce that the best way you can. Oh, malaria, well nearly everybody had malaria fever there. And I used to give them a couple of tablets you know, quinine. It helped you know, helped it to subside.

The armistice signed with the Ottoman Empire in October 1918 brought the Mesopotamian Campaign to an end. There had been around 100,000 casualties amongst the British and Indian troops during the four years it

had lasted. It was seen by many to have been a huge and pointless waste of life. Henry Rich may have survived the five-month Siege of Kut, but he didn't escape its longer-term effects.

When I got back to England, I decided that I'd got to do something to get Kut out of my system. And I had saved a certain amount of money; I lived in London and blew it all in about six weeks. And I always say that that put me sane. Denied myself nothing, wine and women! Wine and women. We went to dances; we went to everything, we drank what we wanted and just really blew the money. I was young and able to cope with difficulties and I found that you could almost draw an age line and say that below that line, whatever it was 30 or so, it won't affect anyone and above that line it'll affect everybody. Mind you it has affected us to a certain extent, we're all slightly dippy but apart from that it doesn't matter.

Voices of the First World War is a podcast series that reveals the impact the war had on everyone who lived through it through the stories of the men and women who were there.

Courtesy of Google Maps:
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