

Norfolk in World War One

NOVEMBER 9, 2015 BY SARAH

The 2nd Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment in Mesopotamia

Our correspondent on all things Mesopotamia in WW1 has survived the desert summer and returns with a new post about the Norfolks in the Middle East.

The 2nd Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment in Mesopotamia

Summary for August – October 2015.

Dates and events given here are a summary of the narrative related in *The History of the Norfolk Regiment, Volume II (1914-1918)* by F. Loraine Petre from the published edition of Jarrold & Sons Limited: The Empire Press. A facsimile of the Jarrold original has recently been made available by The Naval & Military Press (www.naval-military-press.com (<http://www.naval-military-press.com/>))

Thanks and appreciation for her help and advice, as always, go to the Curator of the Royal Norfolk Regimental Museum.

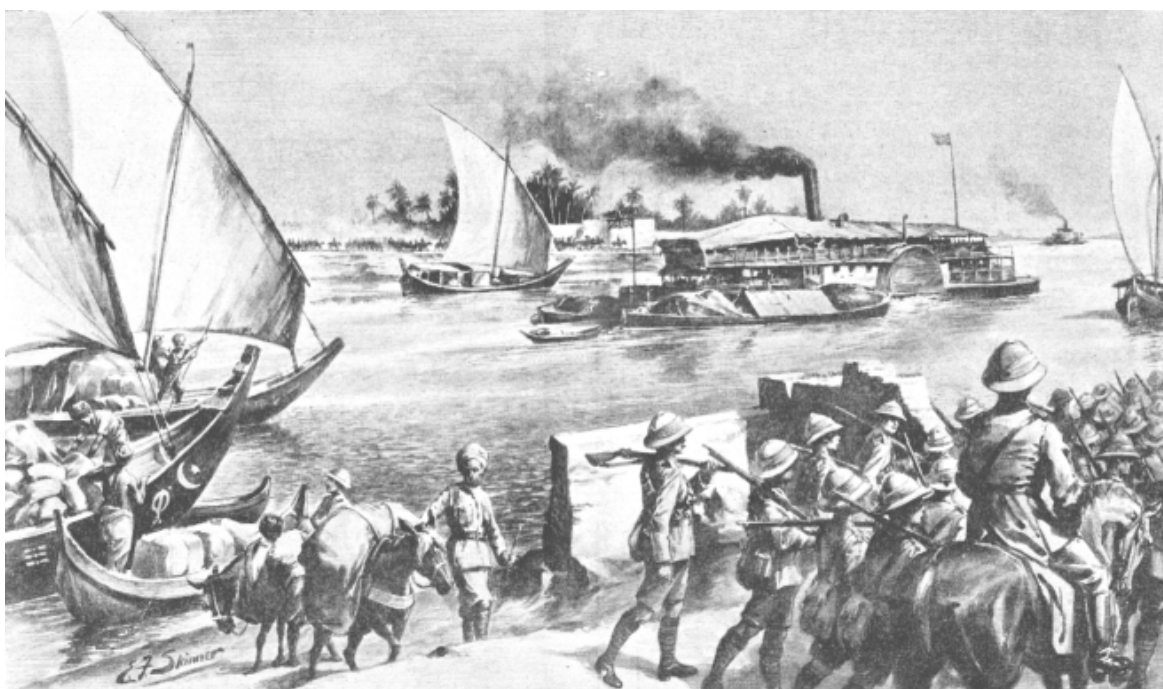
The main event of this quarter was the capture of Kut al Amara on 29th September by the 6th (Poona) Division, led by General Charles Townshend of Raynham Hall. But, as an Unidentified Officer of the Norfolk Regiment observes in a letter dated 1st October:

Well now, about this scrap; our part was not at all a glorious one I can tell you, consisting merely in lying out in the open in shallow trenches being shelled all day for 2 days, in a blasting sun, no shade, clouds of dust; above all, very little water as we only had our water bottles and a few tins we got filled occasionally at the river a few miles away. Oh it was the rottenest 3 days I've ever spent, no chance to wash or move except at night; someone had to do it of course, and as we had Nasarijah to our credit, we did the holding while the 16th and 17th Bdes. did the big attack... We were lucky to have so few casualties, the whole brigade [18th Indian Infantry Brigade] had only 150.

There is a hint of frustration in this officer's letter, and this is apparent even in the objectively-written daily war diaries of the 2nd Battalion. Three themes are evident from the sources: slow progress upstream on the River Tigris, sometimes in paddle steamers, though often walking along the river banks as the paddle steamers grounded in the shallows; the daily round of making camp and digging trenches and

building redoubts; and the progressive onset of debilitating illness.

However, this is how *The War Illustrated* of 1st April 1916 pictured 'Townshend's Regatta' as it made its way upstream towards Kut:



(<https://norfolkinworldwar1.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/along-the-river.jpg>)

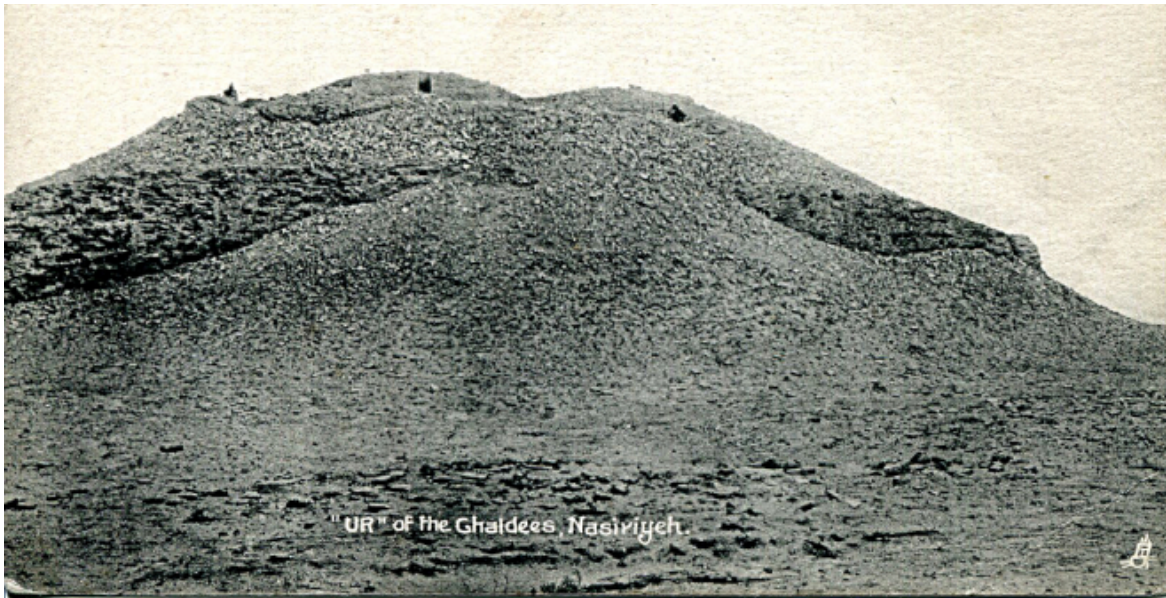
The caption reads: **Along the River Way to Kut: Impression of the Old World Tigris in Twentieth Century War**, and the description idealized and romanticized for its readers a view of the war in Mesopotamia that is not borne out by the accounts of the soldiers:

The traditional glamour and romance of war may be said to have passed from highly organised Europe with the introduction of the big gun, the high explosive, railways, and the other inventions of the workshop and laboratory. Only by going further afield to the changeless East, does a permanent picturesqueness introduce itself into the chapter of brute and mechanical force. Along the sluggish Tigris, round about the alleged site of Eden, save for an occasional aeroplane, a primitive steam vessel, and a few weapons of modern calibre, the war drags on in a dreamy environment with characteristic Oriental leisure.

With our access from the Persian Gulf to within a few miles of Kut-el-Amara there is a constant procession of soldiers and transport along the Tigris. The most familiar and modern vessels are paddle-steamers, each displacing about 500 tons, and towing two lighters. These move slowly up and down stream, keeping pace with the troops on either bank, each acting as a parent ship to a brigade. Following in its wake, an number of romantic-looking mahailas with gracefully curved prows, upon which appears some inscription in Arabic, and rigged with large lateen sails, carry supplies to replenish those of the paddle-steamers. Palm trees, blue sky, and yellow sand complete the picture.

As the Norfolk's departed Nasiriyah they would have been close to one of Mesopotamia's ancient sites, the city of Ur, later excavated by the British archaeologist, Leonard Woolley, for the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania. (*Ur of the Chaldees*, Leonard Woolley, Penguin, 1952) It is shown here in a postcard of the time.





(https://norfolkinworldwar1.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/ur-of-the-chaldees_postcard.jpg)

At the beginning of August the 2nd Norfolks were still on the Euphrates downstream of Nasiriyah, and had a difficult time navigating the river and falling level of the Hammar Lake, but by the 7th August they had arrived at Amara on the Tigris (see maps in earlier Mesopotamia postings). The troops were transported up the Tigris on the 'Mejidieh' as the Unidentified Officer relates with some pleasure:

Then our barges were put onto a large river steamer where we were in the lap of luxury, never been so comfortable on any boat as we've got the large boat and 2 lighters for the whole battalion, so the officers have bags of room and so have the men. Only wish the journey could have lasted longer; a nice breeze the whole way, so not so impossibly hot.

5 th August 1915	Reached Kubaish at 9 a.m. Transhipped... to Mejidieh... Reached Kurna at 3 p.m. Shipped 20 days rations and left at 7.30 p.m. for Amara
6 th August 1915	Still on Mejidieh. Passed Ezra's Tomb at 9 am. Anchored some way below Amara.
7 th August 1915	Arrived Amara 6 a.m.; delayed 2 hours by ships manoeuvring about the bridges. Landed and all kit ashore by 9.30 a.m. Battalion billeted in Norfolk House and 12 huts.

In a letter dated 8th August, the Unidentified Officer speculates on the future conduct of the campaign in a letter:

After hearing all sorts of rumours on the way up here we simply disembarked... and here we shall wait for the rest of the brigade... Shall be here a week before we are ready to move on to the next place, Ali Gharbi, where the 16th Bde already are.





(<https://norfolkinworldwar1.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/ali-gharbi.jpg>)

Unloading supplies from mahellas at the British Camp at Ali Gharbi on the Tigris

The rumours about which the officer writes reflected a concern about how far and how fast the Anglo-Indian force should proceed towards Baghdad. The dramatis personae in this performance were:

- *Charles Hardinge* (1st Baron Hardinge of Penshurst), Viceroy of India
- *Austen Chamberlain*, Secretary of State for India, head of the India Office in London, and a member of the British Cabinet
- *Major-General Sir John Nixon*, Commander-in-Chief of Indian Expeditionary Force 'D'
- *Major-General Charles Townshend*, Commander of 6th Indian (Poona) Division and subordinate field commander to Sir John Nixon



(https://norfolkinworldwar1.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/hardinge_chamberlain_nixon_townshend.jpg)

Lord Hardinge; Austen Chamberlain; General Nixon; General Townshend

The Unidentified Officer again, on 29th August:

Gen. Townshend has come back full of buck, having been to India sick for the last 2 months, can't say he looks well.

Townshend had collapsed on the 6th June following the capture of Amara, and was concerned how far Force D should advance in Mesopotamia. However, buoyant following the capture of Nasiriyah, both Lord Hardinge and Sir John Nixon had the bit between their teeth and wanted to press on to Kut al Amara.

Austen Chamberlain in London advised the evacuation of Nasiriyah as it was such an unhealthy place for British troops, but Hardinge thought it too important a centre for potential Anglo-Indian administration for it to be abandoned.

Townshend's particular concerns were the adequacy of the supply lines between Basra and Kut, some 120 miles distant, and dependent upon river transport along the Tigris which was notoriously difficult to navigate, and with too few suitable vessels, but also the physical and mental welfare of his troops in Mesopotamia's challenging environment.

As Charles Townshend writes in *When God made Hell*: A striking fact about Nixon's offensive commitment was how doubtful his most successful commander was about it.

By 25th October, following the capture of Kut, the Unidentified Officer writes in a letter from Aziziah, just 50 miles from Baghdad:

Our general didn't want to come beyond Kut as it's made such a long line, and with the river so low we have so few boats we can't get stuff up, we haven't got our winter kits yet. By jove it's getting quite cold at night now.

The 2nd Battalion war diaries provide an insight into the daily routine of the Norfolks during August 1915:

9 th August 1915	Company parades at 5.45 a.m. Heavy wind blowing
10 th August 1915	Parades as yesterday
11 th August 1915	Company parades and route marches
12 th August 1915	Company parades and route marches
13 th August 1915	Company parades and route marches
14 th August 1915	Parades same as yesterday
15 th August 1915	Sunday. Divine Service. Major Lodge rejoined from command (temporary) of 1/4 Hants.
16 th August 1915	Parades as last week.
17 th August 1915	Company parades and route marches
19 th August 1915	Company parades and route marches
20 th August 1915	Company parades and route marches
21 st August 1915	Company parades and route marches
22 nd August 1915	Sunday. Divine Service
23 rd August 1915	Battalion parade
24 th August 1915	Company parades and route marches
25 th August 1915	Battalion parade. Class of instruction in bridging with "Wheatly bags"... Another class (in bomb throwing) started.

Until 5th September the daily parades were supplemented by bridging and bomb throwing classes as well as a machine gun class.

On 28th August a draft of 190 men arrived; being men of the Battn. previously invalided, reservists...

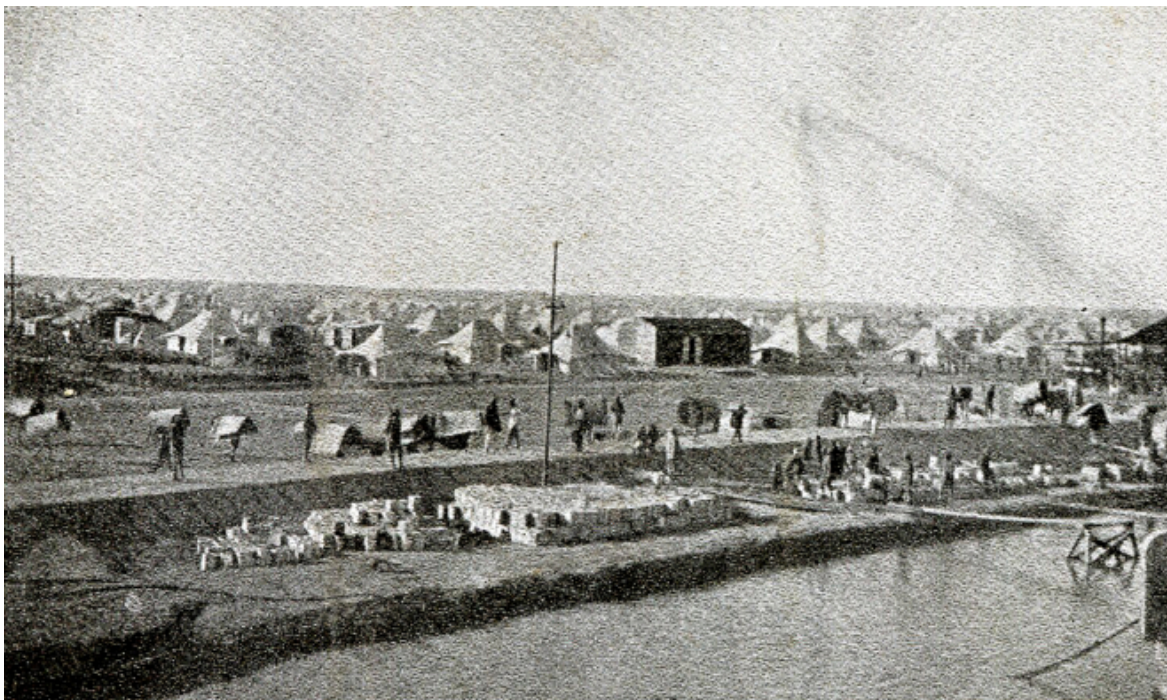
As the Unidentified Officer observes on 29th August:

Got a large draft out a few days ago of 190 men, mostly Terriers [Territorials] from India, just arrived in time to save the battalion disappearing altogether.

On 7th September the Norfolks set off again up the Tigris and reached Ali-al-Gharbi that night, where the steamer anchored.

10 th September 1915	Information received that the enemy about 1000 strong with 2 guns are entrenched 6 miles north
12 th September 1915	Loaded kit etc. on board "Blosse Lynch". Heard about 8 a.m. that she will not start until tomorrow. Pitch tents for ½ Battn. the other half sheltered

	from the sun on board.
13th September 1915	“Blosse Lynch” sailed in accordance with 18 th Brigade order no. 2. Reached destination, a village called Mandali at 3.15 p.m.... Country passed through very flat and sparsely populated. Banks high [owing to the falling river level].
14 th September 1915	Embarked at 5.30 a.m. and sailed at 6 a.m. All reached SHEIKH SAAD and found it deserted at 11 a.m. Anchored above. Received instructions for reconnaissance towards KUT-el-AMARA [by naval flotilla – there had already been an air reconnaissance that day reporting on enemy encampments], directed towards ES-SINN, to ascertain if the Turkish position near KUT is held in strength or not, by approaching the enemy’s position, engaging in a partial skirmish and then retiring.



(<https://norfolkinworldwar1.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/sheikh-saad-camp.jpg>)

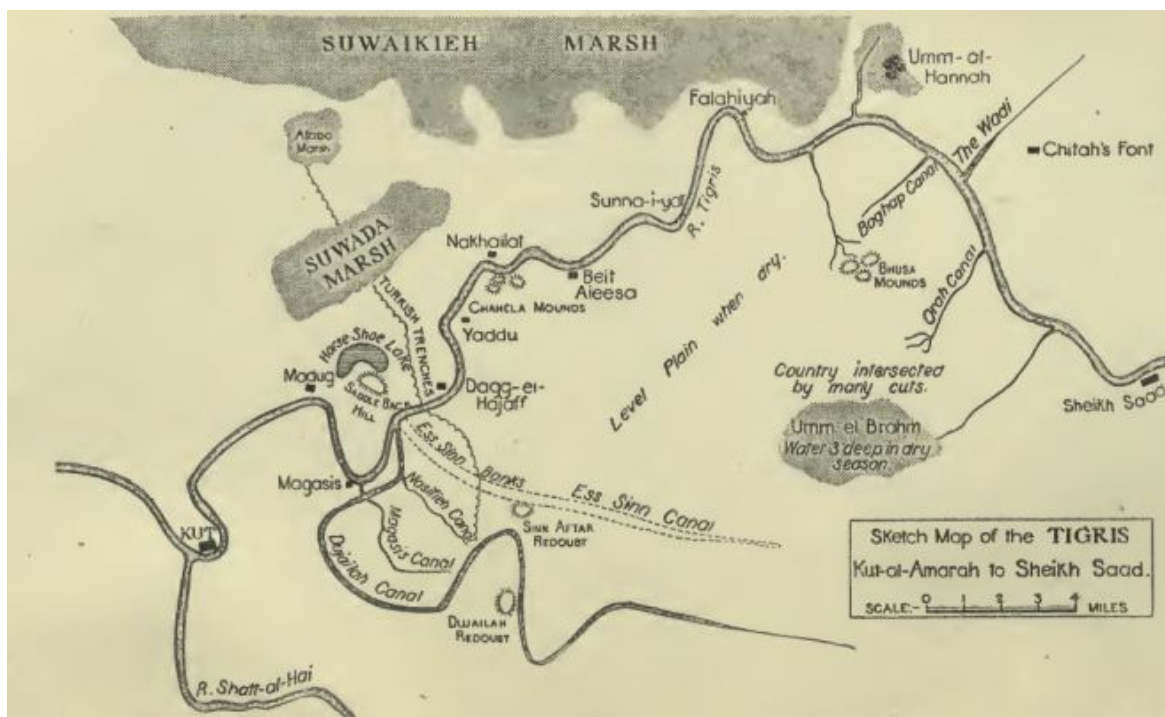
The British Camp at Sheikh Saad on the Tigris

After steaming up beyond Sannaiyat on the 15th, the battalion disembarked, and the next day ‘A’ and ‘B’

companies were sent across to the right bank to support the cavalry there. Nothing more of importance happened from 17th to the 24th...

25 th September 1915	Carried ammunition, tools and M. gun gear to "Blosse Lynch" and loaded it after breakfasts
26 th September 1915	All embarked on "Blosse Lynch" by 5.30 a.m. No lights allowed. Sailed one hour later. 7.50 Banked in 1½ miles east of NAKHAILAT village and disembarked. Moved about 1 mile westward and bivouacked – no shelter. Made aerodrome and dug light shelter trenches.

The enemy on the left bank were entrenched on a line extending from the Tigris on their right to the Suwada marsh, and again beyond it to wards the small marsh south of the great Suwaikieh swamp. On the right bank the line was extended south-eastwards along the Es Sinn ridge.



(https://norfolkinworldwar1.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/map_kut-to-sheikh-saad_cato_1917.jpg)

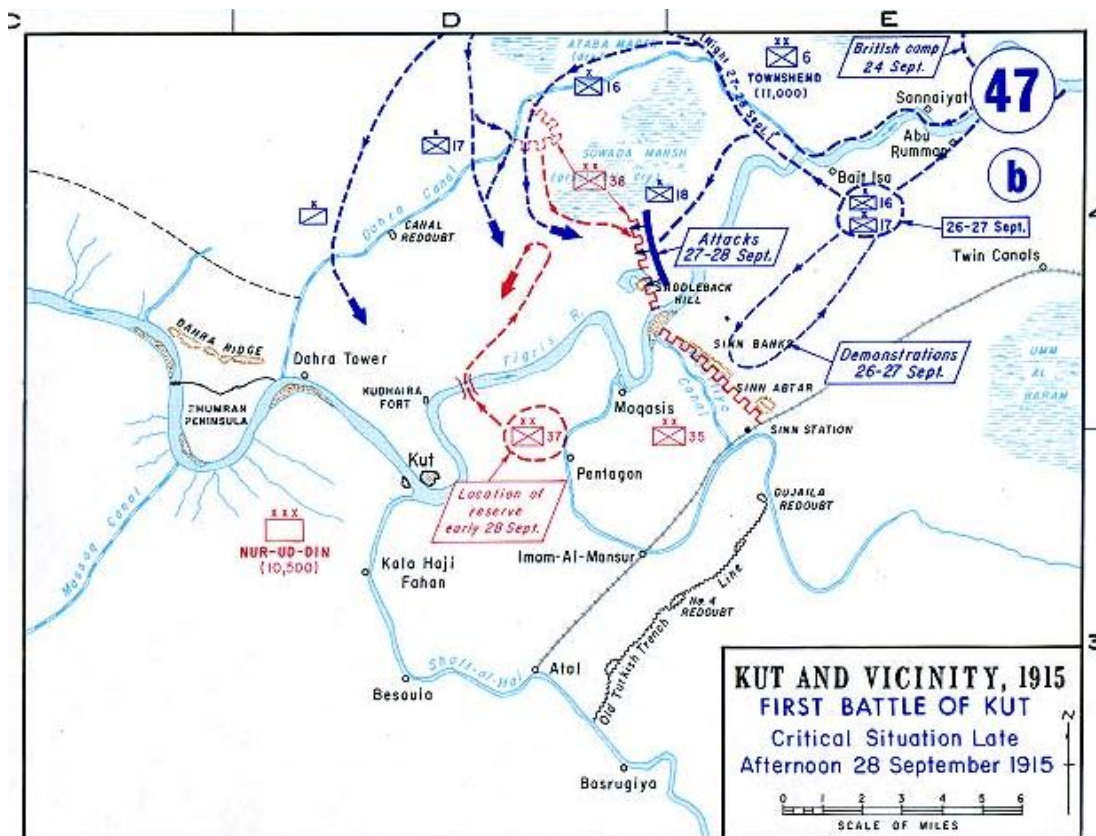
The Tigris from Kut al Amara to Sheikh Saad
The Navy in Mesopotamia, Conrad Cato, 1917

This is not the opportunity for an analysis of the feinting demonstrations known as the battle of Es Sinn, nor of the battle proper for Kut. However, Major (later Lt Col) Lodge, commanding the 2nd Battalion of

not of the same proportion as the 120th Rajputana, Major (later Lt Col) Ridge, commanding the 2nd Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment, writes about them in his diary:

<p>Sept. 27th</p>	<p>The Brigade (18th) of which the regiment forms part, moved out from camp at 5.15 am towards the enemy's position. We were on the right of the line with our right roughly in the marsh, the 120th [Rajputanas] on our left, and beyond them the 7th Rajputs, the 110th [Maharattas] forming the support. We moved out in artillery formation.</p> <p>The enemy began shelling us and there was good deal of rifle fire. C & D Coys eventually occupied an advanced line taking advantage of an irrigation channel more or less parallel to the enemy's position and about 600 yards distance. A & B Coys formed the 2nd line.</p> <p>I detailed a party of 6 under Sergt Friston to deal with snipers on our right front which were giving us a good deal of trouble, he did so effectively bringing in 35 prisoners including an officer.</p> <p><i>(NB Sergeant Friston was awarded the D.C.M. for this exploit. He was afterwards killed at Ctesiphon)</i></p> <p>Spent a lively day under gun and rifle fire, but were able to improve our shelter so did not have many casualties. We could not get any food up until after dark...</p>
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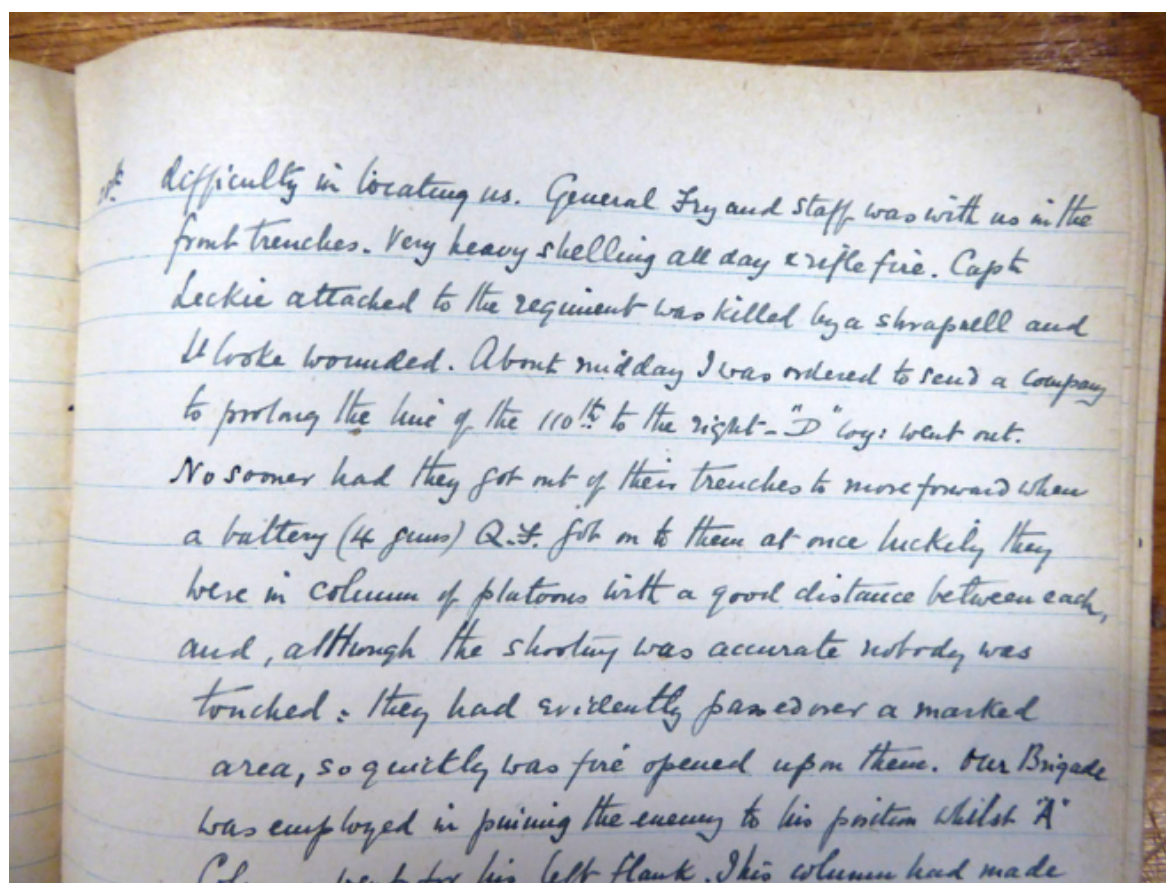
The function of the 18th Brigade was to stimulate a decisive frontal attack along the left bank, while the principal mass of the British force turned the whole Turkish position by passing between the Suwaka and Suwaikieh marshes and began wheeling to its left on Kut.



(https://norfolkinworldwar1.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/map_-first-battle-of-kut-1915.jpg)

Public domain image – courtesy of U.S. Military Academy (West Point)

Sept. 28 th	<p>General Fry [commanding the 18th Brigade] was with us in the front trenches. Very heavy shelling all day and rifle fire.</p> <p>Capt'n Leckie attached to the regiment [Royal Fusiliers] was killed by a shrapnel and Lt Cooke wounded.</p> <p>About midday I was ordered to send a company to prolong the line of the 110th to the right – "D" Coy: went out. No sooner had they got out of their trenches to move forward when a battery (4 guns) Q.F. got on to them at once luckily they were in column of platoons with a good distance between each, and, although the shooting was accurate nobody was touched.</p> <p>"A" column successfully captured the enemy's left works during the morning, they attacked again in the afternoon. The Turks countered but were driven off – we co-operated. We were subjected to heavy gun and rifle fire until well after dark. We managed to get up some food during the night.</p> <p>Sent officers patrols out during the night – Richie reported that he had got up to the Turk's barbed wire and was not fired upon.</p>
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(https://norfolkinworldwar1.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/lodge-diary_28091915.jpg)

The entry for 28th September 1915 in the diary of Lt. Col. Lodge

Sept. 29 th	<p>Early morning patrols discovered that the Turks had had evacuated their positions during the night, so we advanced at once into the position. We had to go cautiously as we knew they had mined a large portion of the</p>
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	<p>ground in front. As we approached the trenches we realized that the enemy had made a most thorough preparation, all cover in the shape of water cuts, had been filled in barbed wire, military pits with stakes at the bottom had been dug, in fact every sort of obstacle had been constructed to keep us out. The trenches were splendidly made, with overhead cover, and facilities for water etc. made. They were surprisingly clean too.</p> <p>We at once got to work to collect material left behind... [which] was dumped near river to assist removal by barges.</p> <p>We moved forward and for some time occupied an evacuated horse coral, beautifully made of dried mud bricks with feeding troughs of the same material complete. Then we received orders to push in to the river where our steamers eventually arrived.</p> <p>We had to construct ramps down the banks for the guns, this took time and it was dark when we banked in just below Kut el Amara. The 16th Bde. is in Kut. Had my first hot drink of tea since the 26th.</p>
Sept. 30 th	<p>Slept in a cabin, a great luxury. We moved on at dawn. It was very cold and I was glad of my coat. The minarets of Kut can be seen not far away.</p> <p>We are now, 7.30 am stuck in a bend of the river... eventually got through... and anchored off Kut on the right bank at the village of Woolpress, which village we were to become intimately acquainted with later on.</p>

The Unidentified Officer of the Norfolk Regiment concluded his letter of 1st October 1915:

Despite the Turk's constant defeats – shows how sure they were, their commander [General Nur ud Din Pasha] is supposed to have wired Constantinople saying that he could hold out indefinitely at Kut. What a position to abandon, a perfect one, could hardly wish for a better.

The Turks lost approximately 5,300 men and all their guns.

On the 2nd September, the Norfolks embarked from Kut upriver for the second phase of General Sir John Nixon's controversial advance on Baghdad. On board the 'Blosse Lynch' the problems of navigating the Tigris were recorded in the 2nd Battalions war diary:

Sailed 6 a.m. sticking all the way up – had to march the men along the bank and even then the ship stuck frequently. Total progress for the day about 8 miles, a delay of many hours being caused at one point and the ship only got out of it by taking all the men and every bit of stores out of her.

By 5th September they had arrived at Azizie. The official war diary of the 2nd Battalion reports the work undertaken by the men:

5 th October 1915	<p>Arrived at AZIZIE at 9.30 a.m... Dug hard all day and by dark had a strong position made 300^X N.W. of the village...</p> <p>Started work on the barges attached to the "Blosse Lynch" ... 30 men working nearly all day getting bits of Divisional Hd. Qrs. Out of the Medjidieh and helping to pitch the Divn. H.Q. camp</p>
7 th October 1915	<p>Started work in early morning as soon as light on trenches and defences... Knocked off at 11 a.m. as sun was getting too hot for digging.</p>

	<p>At 12 noon received orders to send 50 men to work for the artillery from 4 p.m. to 6.30 p.m.</p> <p>The R.E. [Royal Engineers] (bridging) fatigue continued till dark and is still unfinished</p>
8 th October 1915	<p>“A” Coy fatigue under the R.E. continued making wire entanglements along our front till 10 a.m. after which it is too hot to work.</p> <p>“B” Coy... on R.E. Fatigue yesterday have 29 sick today.</p> <p>The Battalion left Es Sinn on 29th September 611 strong. Today 92 reported sick, of whom the M.O. [medical officer] says 70 are unfit to fight. In addition 33 have been admitted to hospital – 103 men out of action in 8 days without a shot being fired. The high percentage of sick is chiefly the result of fatigue work in the sun, which is still very strong</p>
10 th October 1915	Continued work on wire and trenches. Percentage of sick still very high. Yesterday we had 44 men in the field ambulance here, and this morning 95 reported sick.
13 th October 1915	<p>Several men of the Battn. are discovered to be suffering from what is suspected to be beri-beri. One man (Pte. Skipper) died of it this evening.</p> <p><i>[Beri-beri is caused by a deficiency of vitamin B1 (thiamine)]</i></p>
15 th October 1915	Maj. Gen Fry left on sick leave... The beri-beri cases now number 20, but all are said to be doing well.
18 th October 1915	Blosse Lynch arrived with Capt. A.J. Shakeshaft [whose diaries are an important source for the siege of Kut later].
29 th October 1915	Brush cutting fatigues as usual.
30 th October 1915	Brush cutting fatigues as usual.
31 st October 1915	Brush cutting fatigues as usual.

The Unidentified Officer summarizes the position of the Battalion in a letter written at Aziziah (Azizie) on 25th October:

We went on steaming up this old river till we came to our present camp some 100 miles by river from Baghdad and 50 miles by road.

The trouble is we are so dreadfully weak... you have no idea what an awful state the men are in, quite played out, not a kick in them at all.

Had a proper lot of digging since we've been here and see no signs of it ceasing yet awhile; helped to knock the men up of course on top of bad feeding which is half the trouble. Have had no vegetables of any sort for 2 months, and no potatoes for nearly 5, no wonder the men have a sort of epidemic which is put down to lack of vegetables.

At the end of the month the Norfolks were encamped at Azizie, not having participated in the British capture of El Kutunie on 27th October.

A companion piece to this entry will be published later in the month with a post about the Norfolk Regiment's Casualties in this theatre of war.



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