"DUJAILAH" DAYS

by

Colonel G. B. OERTON, T.D., D.L.

"OVER THE SWEDES AND TURNIPS."

FOREWARD

This brief history of events prior to, and during the Battle of "Dujailah" was originally the subject of a paper read by me to the Barnstaple Rotary Club many years ago. I willingly agree to its present publication and for the following reasons:-

First and foremost the 6th Battalion The Devonshire Regiment, are now no more, and unless there is some permanent record of this kind, then what this Territorial Battalion did, during that epic and tragic period covered by this account, will be relegated to the limbo of forgotten things.

The Battalion was first raised as the 4th Volunteer Battalion The Devonshire Regiment in 1859, to repel a threatened French invasion. It was disbanded in 1947, and during those 88 years of keen, efficient, and indeed distinguished service, it won honours galore in the shooting world. For example, the King's Prize twice, the "Daily Telegraph" Cup and other trophies too numerous to detail at Bisley, and every possible open Territorial Army Competition at one time or another. During the South African War, drafts reinforced the two regular Battalions, and during the late War, Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, and men on its strength, fought in every theatre of War, from the beaches of Normandy to Berlin, from El Alamein to Regalbuto and in the jungles of Burma, but, only in the first Great War have they sailed overseas together for active service as a full Battalion.

I feel, therefore, and very strongly, that what was then done, and the sacrifices then made, should not be forgotten, least of all here in North Devon.

I do not pretend that this story is anything more than a record of my own personal impressions and opinions, nor do I pretend that it is in any way adequate or comprehensive. I have, however, taken care to ensure its accuracy.

It is dedicated to The Sixth Battalion The Devonshire Regiment with which I had the honour to serve for nearly forty years, and particularly in proud and grateful memory of those who fell in the Battle of "Dujailah".

Should any profit be made through its sale, it will be given to the 1/6 Devons Old Comrades Association.

G. B. OERTON.

Barnstaple, 8th March, 1948.

NOTE.

With regard to the illustrations (such as they are), please do not be too critical! These photographs were taken over 32 years ago, under trying conditions; the two of the 6th on the march, with a tiny Vest Pocket Kodak.

They are untouched, and are only intended to give some idea of the country and the conditions prevailing at the time they were taken.

"DUJAILAH" DAYS

The story of the part played by the 6th Battalion The Devonshire Regiment at The Battle of "Dujailah", would fail to give a true impression and atmosphere of conditions then existing, without some account of what the Battalion did in Mesopotamia immediately prior to its first real baptism of fire.

The Battalion disembarked at Basra from the H.T. "Elephanta" on January 3rd, 1916, and on the 10th January the long forced march up country began.

We formed part of the 36th (Mixed) Infantry Brigade under Brigadier General Christian, the other Battalions in the Brigade being the 26th and 62nd Punjabis, the 82nd Punjabis joining us later. The Battalion was hard and fit after a year's exacting duty in India; had come through "Kitchener's Test" with flying colours, and was desperately keen to be in a War Zone; more particularly to be in time to assist in the attempt to relieve the beleaguered garrison at Kut el Amara, over 250 miles away up the Tigris river.

Amongst this hard pressed and starving garrison were some 40 North Devon men of the 6th who had been drafted from India earlier to join the 2nd Dorsets. No men, therefore, ever had a greater incentive to spur them on in an attempt to succour their comrades than they. They would have gone through (and literally did go through), fire and water to achieve this. They had no intention of letting their pals fall into the hands of the Turks, or worse still the Arabs if they could possibly prevent it.

What can be written of that never-to-be-forgotten march from Basra to El Orah that has not been written before? Two hundred and thirty miles of mud, filth, cold, floods, starvation and desolation. On half rations (a tin of bully and two biscuits a day), with no variation of any sort except, possibly, a very occasional tin of Australian jam. Impossible to make fires, even had there been any fuel. Often lying in the mud all night, without cover of any sort, as the "mahailas" with the tents and rations aboard could not reach us, the swollen and flooding Tigris with its endless difficult bends proving too much for them. Dressed in thin Indian drill uniform, although the weather was then bitterly cold and wet. The Government of India, in their wisdom, had decided that Mesopotamia, even in winter, was a "hot" country. We were, therefore, half frozen, exposed and starved, our only drink being from the unfiltered, filthy "pea soup" water from the river. Mile after mile up to our knees in mud, which was more like glue. Often through floods extending miles in every direction, a waste of mud and water as far as the eye could see - literally scores of miles at times without even a palm tree, a blade of grass or a stone to break the monotony and utter desolation.

But through it all those North Devon boys (they were then little more), marched - or rather, struggled and waded doggedly on, making light of cold, hunger, blistered and sodden feet and heart-breaking fatigue; it seemed incongruous and almost brought a lump into one's throat to hear them singing "The Farmer's Boy", "One man went to mow", or "Widdecombe Fair", as they almost fought their way along the banks of the Tigris. Cheerful and unselfish, turning everything into a laugh, carrying the rifles of, and giving a hand to, their weaker pals.

Never did we arrive at the patch of mud mis-called "camp" at the end of the day without the strains of my mouth-organ section playing the Company in to the Regimental March "We've lived and loved together", better known as "Over the Swedes and Turnips". When hearts and bodies were nearly broken with utter weariness, I had only to say to one of my sergeants (affectionately known as "George") "Give them 'The Farmer's Boy', Sergeant", and then backs would straighten, and spirits lighten, as Sergeant George's magnificent voice sang the Devon songs they loved, and in which they could all join.

For hours at a time he would instil fresh heart into everyone in the Company, although what efforts of superhuman will-power that cost him God and he alone knew. He was weary, very, very weary, but Heaven had given him a wonderful voice, and if using it helped, he would help, and that was all. Sergeant George has since passed on to join his comrades, but he earned the V.C. ten times over for moral and spiritual valour during that march - a soldier and a man every inch of him. There were many others like him in the Company and Battalion.

A more detailed history of those days might make interesting reading to many, but space does not permit. One could write of Qurna, the traditional site of the Garden of Eden, which we struggled through on the 14th of January - a waste of mud with some squalid Arab and Turkish buildings. A few palms were the only paradisiacal things in the "Garden". Troops, as usual, christened some of the so-called streets - "Rib Road", "Eve's Walk", "Serpent's Alley" and "Temptation Square". The story goes that a weary and fed up private when told that Qurna was the reputed Garden of Eden from which our first parents were driven out by the Angel with the Flaming Sword, took a good look and remarked:- "it would take no bloomin' sword to turn me out of this". Then there was "Ezra's Tomb", with its beautiful blue dome, an outstanding landmark on the banks of the Tigris, but such landmarks, and breaks in the monotony, were very few and far between.

On the 5th February, after nearly a month's marching, we passed over the battlefield of "Sheikh Saad", where the 7th Division had dislodged the Turk on January 7th. This was the first of the ghastly and expensive frontal attacks for which these operations became famous or infamous, over 4,000 casualties resulting casualties which, as is well known, could not be dealt with. Hundreds were left to die in the mud or be

butchered, stripped and mutilated by those human jackals, the Arabs. A battlefield in France was not a pretty sight, but a battlefield in Mesopotamia was a veritable nightmare. Swollen, naked and mutilated bodies, friend and foe, mule and camel, living in dreadful heaps, a pitiful and mute protest to Heaven of the futility and horror of it all.

6TH DEVONS ON THE "ROAD" TO KUT.

Some of those Devon lads looked a little white and sick (as who wouldn't gazing for the first time on such a spectacle?); but, I do not think any of them allowed their thoughts to worry them unduly. The main effect was to strengthen, still more, their resolution that those friends of theirs in Kut must be rescued at all costs.

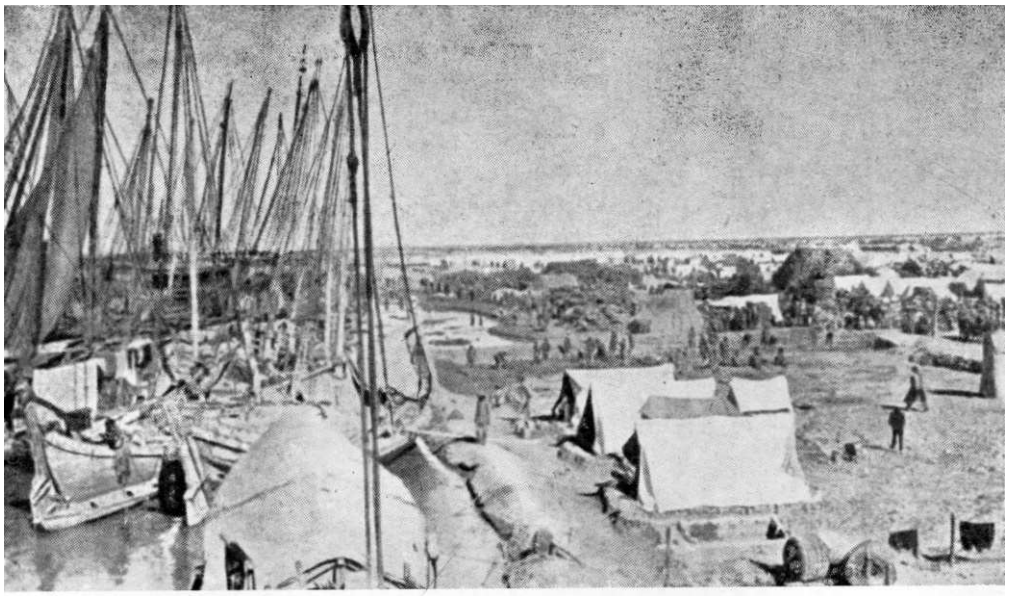
Beyond "Sheikh Saad" were those two other equally dreadful battlefields of the Wadi, fought on the 13th January, and Umm'el Hannah (by El Orah) on January 21st - more frontal attacks, heavy casualties and, for many, lingering death in the mud.

I have referred briefly to one battlefield only. The others were similar. I would like to describe in the strongest possible language those others, as the more vividly such scenes are portrayed, the less likely are they to be repeated. War is the one subject which needs to be treated in its naked truth. The cruelest part of the Mesopotamian campaign, as Edmund Candler (the Official "Eye-Witness") pointed out, was that it asked men to face modern machinery of destruction, without granting them the resources of alleviation of suffering which modern science provided. There were boatloads of wounded going down the Tigris, huddled on the bare decks without even covering from sleet and rain. No lint and gauze dressings, nor splints. Not enough doctors. Sufferings increased by cold, hunger, thirst, dirt, exposure and neglect. Those wounded arrived at Amaria and Basra unfed, untended, with bed, or rather deck sores - some dying; first field dressings, eight days old, unchanged; maggots in their wounds, gangrene and other abominations too revolting to mention. Other wounded were not so fortunate as these; they were lost in the mud. All this happening within a few days voyage from India where everything necessary abounded. Assuredly the then Government of India, who were responsible, have much to answer for.

Edmund Candler also described these attacks as 20th Century battles with 18th Century medical arrangements, and when he cabled to India, and home, appealing for medical "comforts", for the troops, he learnt afterwards that his cable had been suppressed by the censor. That censor also has much to answer for.

To revert to our own doings, we arrived at the Wadi and E1 Orah Camp on the 6th February, and found part of the 3rd (Lahore) Division, with the remnants of the 7th (Meerut) Division, all under the command of General Aylmer, in full preparation for a further drive to Kut. Fine regular Battalions of the Black Watch, the Seaforth Highlanders, the Buffs, Leicesters, and the Hants had been practically wiped out, and this applied, of

course to many Battalions of the Indian Army. In the 35th Brigade, for example, not a single field officer was left, and two battalions were commanded by 2nd Lieutenants of the Indian Reserve. The Black Watch and Seaforths were so depleted that they amalgamated into a single Highland Regiment, and the Hants and Buffs were amalgamated into the "Huffs" in the same way as the Norfolks and Dorsets in Kut had been amalgamated into the "Norsets". This stricken force was concentrating on reorganization and refitting and training for the further relief efforts which must be made before operations might be hampered, or held up entirely by further floods.



THE CAMP AT EL ORAH.

The doings of the following month consisted of patrol work, reconnaisances, skirmishes with the Arabs and the manning of the Sennah trenches on the right bank of the river. We all knew that another attempt to relieve General Townsend in Kut must come shortly, and early in March this was evidently imminent. On the 7th March we realised the hour had struck. By that time our Brigade (the 36th), still under General Christian, was complete, the 82nd Punjabis having joined us. This Brigade, therefore, consisted of one battalion of British Infantry (the 1/6 Devons), and the 26th, 62nd and 82nd Punjabis. General Aylmer's total striking force consisted of 23,000 fighting men, but between this force and Kut were the formidable defences of Sannaiyat, and nearer Kut the still more formidable Es Sinn position straddled across both banks of the Tigris, and included in this position and on the extreme right was the Dujailah redoubt. On the extreme left of the Turkish line and north of the river was the impassable Suwacha Marsh.

The scheme, as it afterwards transpired, was to carry the Dujailah redoubt, the key to the whole position, and then to pivot round the enemy's rear, and cut off his communications, so making the right bank untenable. This would compel the Turk to evacuate the left or north bank also, leaving us command of the river and an open door to Kut.

The success of such a venture depended entirely on the element of surprise, and surprise meant a long night march. To get over 20,000 men, with transport and guns, across 18 miles of featureless country in the dark without detection by the enemy pickets and patrols was a task calling for miracles of discipline and organisation. If anything miscarried, chaos, confusion and disaster were bound to ensue. As a matter of fact, and history, this night march was carried out perfectly, and the surprise was complete. How the advantage of such surprise was then completely thrown away will be referred to later.

This night march of the 7th and 8th March has been compared with the other brilliant night march at Tel-el-Kebir, but at Tel-el-Kebir the advance by night was only six miles, the time taken roughly 3½ hours, and the force engaged roughly 13,000. Our column was over 20,000 with transport, ambulances, and guns, was two miles in depth and 600 yards from flank to flank. The distance covered was nearly three times as great as at Tel-el-Kebir; the column in arms three times as long, and the total force nearly twice as large, consisting as it did of the 3rd Division with the 28th, 35th, and 36th Brigades of the 7th Divlsion. General Aylmer now commanded the Corps, and General Gorringe was his Chief of Staff.

Our orders on the evening of the 7th were to be at the "Pools of Siloam", which was the point of assembly, and about four miles march from the Sennah trenches, by 8 p.m. and as soon as it was dark we marched out, on what, to many, was to be their last great adventure. The march to the "Pools of Siloam" was eerie enough, but a still more eerie march was in store. To join a force of 20,000 in the dark, to feel rather than hear or see, a vast and formidable fighting machine groping its way through the desert, was awe-inspiring. Silence, save for occasional whispered orders, a cough, the howl of a distant jackal, or the cry of flighting geese. Hour after hour creeping along, with the desire to sleep almost overpowering.

One's impression after so long an interval are naturally dull and vague, but the main impression I had at the time was one of unreality. It was intensely difficult to appreciate that the inky nebulous and creeping masses around one was an army on the march.

The force had been divided into three columns, A and B (with which were we), under General Kemball, and C under General Keary, and although, naturally, we did not know this at the time, these columns marched together until a point was reached southwards of, and about 10 miles from, Dujailah redoubt. After reaching this point the force bifurcated, A and B making for the depression known as the Dujailah Depression south of the Dujailah redoubt, and C Column under General Keary for a point facing the Turkish lines between the Dujailah and Sinn Aftar redoubts. This column (C) had much the shorter journey. Our Brigade had the longest march of all, being on the extreme lelt of A and B Columns. Actually at one stage we were in the rear of the Redoubt, and only six miles from Kut - nearer, I understand, than any other unit of a relieving force ever got. The Battalion had then been on the march for twelve hours, with a limited water supply and minimum rations. Men were weighed down with their heavy packs, extra ammunition and rifles, a feat of strength and endurance under any conditions, but all this was a mere preliminary to the fighting, and marching, which were to come.

At last came daylight, finding us still plodding to the point of deployment. But one thing was certain - the night march was entirely successful, and the surprise was complete. We went through Arab camps, close to the Turkish lines, and even those wide-awake nomads had no idea that an Army was amongst them.

The sight at dawn, with General Aylmer's army against, and even partly around, the redoubt, must have been one for which any white man in his bed would have stirred for a glimpse. An army of relief, ready to pounce on an unsuspecting, unprepared and, at that moment, numerically negligible foe. But tragedy of tragedies, that army did not pounce, or rather, the part of it (General Keary's column) which was ready and willing, were not allowed to.

General Kemball's column was delayed owing to the guns being an hour and a half late at the point of assembly, and this delay was never made good. There was however, nothing to prevent General Keary going straight in, had he been so ordered.

It was 7 o'clock when General Keary's guns on the east of the redoubt opened fire. At the sound of the opening of the battle I think all our thoughts were as to what the day would bring forth. Some of us might have furtively felt to make sure our first field dressings were safe in the lining of our jackets, as we knew something of the medical arrangements. But more, however, thought of early re-unions with "Bucket" or "Demon" or "Blanco" or others of their pals in Kut with similar unexplainable but happy nicknames.

Hopes ran high. The whole world was much concerned with the fate of the gallant little garrison of Kut. Twice the King had cabled messages of hope and confidence to the troops, and we, part of the relief force, were in the Dujailah Depression actually in the rear of the unsuspecting Turk. Had we but known, those guns from General Keary's column sounded disaster rather than triumph, as surprise was now out of the question. According to orders, General Keary's force had to wait for the attack of General Kemball's column on the south before joining battle, and the Higher Command, instead of amending such plans in conformity with unforeseen circumstances, insisted that such plan must be adhered to. Hence General Keary's column, with the exception of the guns, stood idly by for practically the whole of the day, whilst the Turk reinforced the trenches and the redoubt.

At 0715 hours we (the 36th Brigade) deployed for the attack, and were thrown out in the direction of the shrine Iman A1i Mansur, to clear some trenches three miles from the bend. It was there, that we got so near to, and yet so far from, Kut, which we could plainly see through our glasses. The battalion had come under enfilade fire from Sinn trenches, and several casualties resulted, but they duly gained their objective by 1130 hours.

All this time the Turks were pouring reinforcements from over and up the river, into the Sinn trenches and the Redoubt, and as before emphasised, all this time General Keary's column on the east did nothing. The pre-conceived plan of battle must be adhered to, although there is not the slightest doubt that they could have walked into practically unoccupied trenches at dawn. Aerial reconnaisance had reported the trenches lightly held, and only a picket in the redoubt.

When General Keary's column arrived at day-break, the scantily held gap in the defence yawned patently in front of the 37th Brigade (Somersets and Gurkhas), who reported this weakness, but were not allowed to go in. Had the Higher Comnland not blundered, had the staff been less hide-bound, a different story would have been told. A brilliant success stared one in the face, but the opportunity was not grasped.

To revert to the 6th Devons, they having reached their objective and made good on the extreme left, were recalled with the rest of the 36th Brigade to assist the 28th Brigade in the advance north on the Dujailah redoubt. This was about noon, and by that time the redoubt and the whole Sinn position was heavily manned. It was from then onwards that the real casualties began.

Advancing over ground without a vestige of cover, swept by devastating rifle and machine gun fire from the redoubt (a sheer glacis 25 feet above the plain), such attack be General Kemball's columns was doomed to failure. It later developed into slaughter unnecessary and unbelievable. Never a man held back, and some actually obtained a footing in the redoubt.

General Keary's troops on the east were not thrown in until the late afternoon or evening, when it seemed impossible that the position could be carried. The Turk, heavily reinforced and encouraged, from the shelter of his breastwork, was secure. To make further frontal attacks seemed simply a useless sacrifice of life to extenuate a blunder of command. Waves of chivalry unfalteringly streaming forward to fall in the hail of lead, or for the few who reached the redoubt to be engulfed inside.

The attacking troops showed an almost unbelievable strength of spirit and limb, but all in vain. One man behind a breastwork was worth six outside - the odds were hopeless.

Countless deeds of heroism were performed, and so they fought against an unseen enemy until dark brought at respite, and the troops dug themselves in ready to re-commence the attack in the morning if called upon so to do. Wounded were collected, and the dead buried. The battalion had been fighting and marching since dusk the day before, with little food and less water.

Picture nightfall near the redoubt, men who had marched all through the previous night, and fought all through a day of torrid and sultry heat (the days were then getting very hot), water bottles empty or nearly empty, exhausted to the last degree, and even then their only thought was to get their wounded in, and this they did without a thought for themselves.

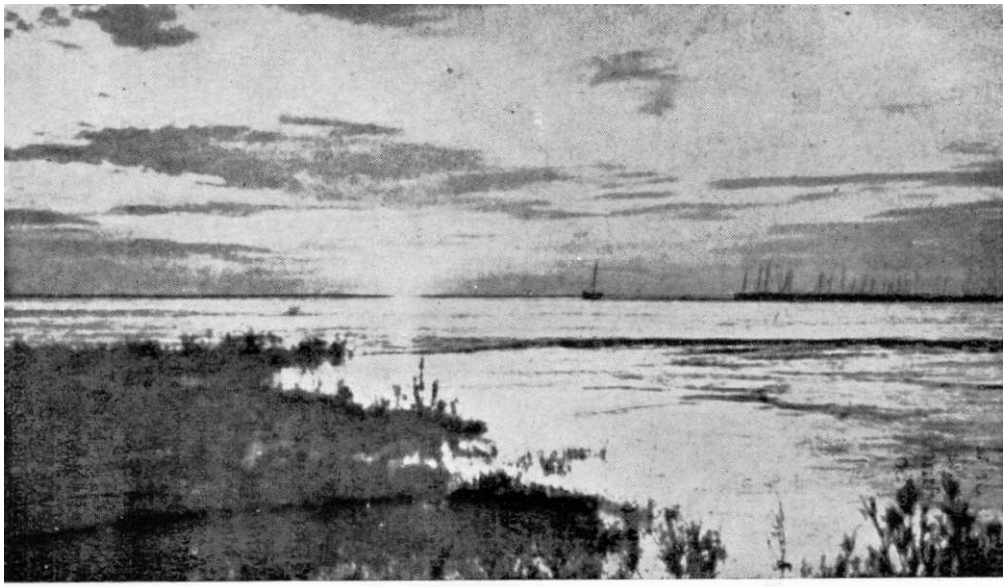
All night they toiled, almost without ceasing, nearly 300 of their comrades killed, wounded and missing, but still uncomplaining, and ready for anything. Carrying and tending their wounded with tenderness, "passing the love of women". Whilst getting them in they, themselves, were constantly being sniped at, and this went on until word came for a general retirement in the very early hours of the morning of the 9th. Back over the desert went the mutilated and heavily stricken army of General Aylmer - heavily stricken inasmuch as the casualties in both columns during the action were 3,476.

The Battalion, exhausted, almost without officers (only ten to carry on out of a total of 29), their backs turned to their comrades in Kut; back 20 miles over the desert first fighting as a flank guard to the retreating

army, then joining the main body. Almost to the hour they had set out full of high hopes two evenings before, they tottered back, bent but not broken. Forty-eight hours of almost ceaseless marching and fighting. The happy family which had sailed from England in October, 1914, in the "Galeka" was no more.

I will not dwell on the sufferings of the wounded during that retreat. Words in any case would fail me. Jolted over the desert in springless A.T. carts drawn by mules, tortured as if on the rack. Badly wounded human beings could never stand the awful jolting which forced limbs and heads through the iron slats, and more often than not the freight was dead before reaching its destination.

The medical arrangements have been criticised too thoroughly to need any repetition, nor do I wish to harrow feelings unduly. In that connection I have only one further word to say, and that is, that our dead were all decently and reverently buried, and the battalion as a battalion was able to pay its last tribute to them, when they came back into the Dujailah Redoubt, this time, practically unopposed, later in the summer. By that time Kut had fallen; after April there were no more suicidal frontal attacks; we had lost 22,000 men in the attempts to relieve the garrison.



NEAR EL ORAH, AT SUNSET.

If my impressions appear to be on the sad side, I cannot help it; penning these words were bound to revive sad, as well as proud and happy memories. I will only plead as my excuse, the excuse given by Edmund Candler, in his preface to his book (to which I am much indebted), “The Long Road to Baghdad”, he says -

> "If in turning out one's kit after a campaign, one were to come on a whiff of iodoform from a garment packed in hospital, it would give one the same sort of shock, reviving sickly memories, abhorrent to sanity whether in body or mind. One should dwell on the glory of war, not cry over its death and wounds. My instinct was to correct these passages, to re-write them in the healthy traditional vein. The only muse whom the self-respecting historian of war may invoke reigns in a sphere where mortality is held of no account. But the fighting in Mesopotamia from January to the end of April, 1916, was not like any other fighting British troops have had to undergo. What I saw was an army wasted in detail, expiating the folly of statesmen and generals in which blunder piled upon blunder made it evident to the troops that their sacrifice was in vain. And not merely in vain, but, as it seemed at the time, thankless. For the force which fought to relieve Townsend, and suffered something like a complete reincarnation in the ordeal, were ill-fed, ill-equipped, and their sick, in many cases, untended. Looking back, I see that an elegiac, rather than a lyric strain, was natural in a non-combatant witness of a tragedy which has no parallel in our military history. So I have left the mournful passages uncorrected. There is more truth in them as they stand."

I agree, entirely, with Edmund Candler, and therefore have not glossed over, nor minimised the "sickly memories". Had I done so it would have been impossible to paint a proper picture or to make North Devon realise and appreciate the hardships and horrors of the Mesopotamian Campaign, bravely and cheerfully endured by her sons.

All I have said has been said with one fixed purpose and idea, that of paying a tribute, however inadequate, and belated, to what my comrades did during one brief period only; but, be it remembered that the battalion had left North Devon in August,1914, and did not return until the 19th August,1919. Five years did they serve overseas, mainly in India and Mesopotamia, enduring unbelievable privations and hardships.

I have also tried, if unsuccessfully, to remove all impression, which was at one time general, that Mesopotamia was a "side-show", and in the opinion of the uninformed, and to use an army expression, "cushy". The chief trouble was that with the clashing of terrific forces nearer home, the interest this campaign would have aroused normally was practically eclipsed. Those of us, however, who saw service on other fronts, including France, are convinced that the earlier Mesopotamian campaign stands pre-eminent when it came to a question of entire lack of alleviation of suffering, whether of body, mind or spirit.

Privation and disease accounted for more casualties even than the bullet-fever, cholera, dysentery, jaundice and scurvy killed men like flies. During the hot weather of 1916-1917 2,500 men were evacuated every week at the clearing hospital at Sheikh Saad, and in one month 15,000 sick left Basra for India, apart from the thousands who crowded every hospital in the country. As an instance of the havoc sickness played, out of one draft of 147 for the 6th Devons which landed at Basra in July, 1916, only one man reached the Battalion at Dujailah.

The cost in casualties for the final victory in Mesopotamia was Officers 4,335, other ranks 93,244 - not exactly "cushy"? Twenty-three Victoria Crosses were awarded to those taking part, and you don't get Victoria Crosses for doing a "cushy" job.

Finally, when I think, as I often think, of the wonderful cheerfulness, comradeship and gallantry shown by those men of the 6th Devons during years of privation, hunger, thirst, fatigue, sickness, suffering and loneliness, when I think of the countless acts of devotion, unselfishness, shown during days which were dark indeed, is it any wonder that when I meet old friends and comrades anywhere here in Devon, I thrill with pride that it was my privilege to serve with them, even if only for a while.

When I think, as I also often think, of those, again my friends and comrades, sleeping by the banks of the Tigris from Basra to Dujailah, I feel the fullest meaning of the words "greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend". There are acres sacred to North Devon in Mesopotamia, hallowed acres to which our thoughts turn with pride as well as sorrow on "Dujailah Day". Those who lie there, died as they had lived, true to their regimental motto "Ever Faithful". Of them it can be said, in the words inscribed below their names on our memorial and Roll of Honour in the Guild Hall, Barnstaple - "Their name liveth for ever-more".