

# THE ROYAL FIELD ARTILLERY 1914-18

1/5th Hampshire (Howitzer) Bty. 04 Aug 1914 - Early 1915. To Mesopotamia where it joined the 6th (Indian) Division.

## **6<sup>th</sup> (Poona) Division**

Formed in Bombay and ordered to Mesopotamia, where it remained. The Division fought the early engagements in Mesopotamia virtually on its own.

The Division **surrendered** after the 5-month long siege of Kut-al-Amara. During the siege, sickness increased to epidemic proportions, especially scurvy and beri-beri, colic and dysentery. Once in captivity the men were cruelly treated by the Turks, mostly through wilful neglect but with many cases of beatings, executions and other crimes. Of the 2,592 Other Ranks of the 6th (Poona) Division who were British, more than 1,700 died in captivity. Of the 9,300 Indian troops, at least 2,500 died.

The 1/5 Hampshire (Howitzer) Bty. joined the 6<sup>th</sup> Division in March 1915.

## ***The siege of Kut-al-Amara***

### **Where this battle took place**

Kut-al-Amara lies on the River Tigris at its confluence with the Shatt-al-Hai (a canal of ancient history), 120 miles upstream from the British positions at Amara and 500 miles upstream from the port of Basra. The town lies in a loop of the river with a small settlement on the opposite bank, and in 1915 was a densely-populated, filthy place. The civilian population was around 7000; many were evicted as the army fell back into the town. It had large local supplies of grain due its peacetime role as a marketplace.

At the time of this action, daytime temperatures had cooled and were no longer a problem; night was freezing.

### **Siege and eventual surrender**



Following the unexpected repulse in front of Ctesiphon, the exhausted and depleted British force was urged back to the defences of Kut-al-Amara, which after an epic retreat was reached on 3rd December 1915.

From Whitehall - in full knowledge that it was going to be impossible to reinforce the army in

Mesopotamia, given all of the other mounting demands - came advice to retire even further downstream. Unfortunately it came too late, for the 6th (Poona) Division was by this time besieged - and learning that 8 more Turkish Divisions, recently moved from Gallipoli now the British force had been defeated there, were massing near Baghdad.



Divisional commander Charles Townshend was promised a rapid relief. He calculated that there were enough supplies in Kut to enable his force to hold out for a month: he was told it might take two months for the relief force to arrive. He sensibly suggested an attempt to break out and retire - but Sir John Nixon ordered him to remain and hold as many Turkish troops around Kut as possible. 10000 fighting men were bottled up in the town as the Turk units surrounded it and sealed off retreat; the boats - the vital lifeline back to Amara - got away just in time.

Townshend at first kept the garrison on a full daily ration, fully confident that a relieving force would arrive. Several large-scale attacks by the Turks were beaten off, with high losses on both sides in December 1915.

Meanwhile the attempt to assemble a force and advance to relieve the garrison failed in a series of bitterly-contested attacks in January and March 1916. The British lost a further 23000 men in the attempt, and the Turks around 10000. At one point, orders were prepared for an effort to break out of the siege. But by April 1916, the supplies had dwindled and the rate of sickness in the town had escalated to epidemic proportions. An attempt by the paddle steamer Julnar to reach the town by river failed after a valiant attempt. Small quantities of supplies were dropped from the air but it was nowhere near enough to save the garrison.

On 26th April 1916, after receiving approval from higher command and Governments, Townshend asked the Turks for a 6-day armistice and permission for 10 days food to be sent into the town. Khalil Pasha, Turkish commander, agreed and requested talks with Townshend the next day. During the talks, Khalil demanded unconditional surrender. Townshend offered a million pounds sterling, all the guns in the town and a promise that the men would not again engage in fighting the Turkish army. Khalil was of a mind to accept; Enver Pasha was not. He wanted a spectacular victory, inflicting as much damage to British prestige as possible. Meanwhile the garrison in Kut used the armistice time to destroy anything useful left in the town. On the 29th, Townshend surrendered. It was the greatest military disaster ever to have befallen the British Army.

### **After the surrender**

But worse was to come. Townshend himself went into a comfortable if isolated captivity. The sick, unfit, undernourished men of the garrison were force-marched, many beaten savagely, many killed by acts of wanton cruelty. More than 3000 of those who surrendered at Kut were murdered by the Turks in this way, while in captivity. Those who survived were little more than skeleton when they were 2 years later released or exchanged.

The British Army lost 227 British and 204 Indian officers and 12828 other ranks - of which 2592 were British - when the garrison surrendered. The Turks killed more than 1700 of the British other ranks and possibly as many as 3000 of the Indian troops, while in captivity. Losses during the fighting during the siege were approximately 2000 and the relieving force lost 23000 in the attempt.

### **Retrospective**

The decision to stand at Kut was a grave mistake: the initiative, until then always with the British in this campaign, passed to the Turks. The forces available to relieve the garrison were too few and too long in coming. The fact that the Tigris Corps, coming to the relief of the garrison, fought a splendid if ultimately unsuccessful campaign was to no avail. The loss of Kut and the Poona Division stunned the British Empire and her Allies and provided another huge morale boost for Turkey and Germany, especially coming so soon after Britain's ignominious withdrawal from Gallipoli. The need to relieve Kut drew more forces into Mesopotamia - what impact would this force have had if it had been deployed into the Western Front at this time, when British strength and reserves were still small?

### **The British Order of Battle**

6th (Poona) Division was the formation that withstood the siege and largely died in captivity, at Turkish hands.

As Ernest Thomas Waterhouse was now part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division it can only mean that he must have gone through hell in Mesopotamia. He died on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1916. The surrender happened one month earlier on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1916. This meant he lived through the siege but died in captivity.

**In Memory of  
Gunner ERNEST THOMAS WATERHOUSE**

**4517, 1st/5th Hants Howitzer Bty., Royal Field Artillery  
who died age 25  
on 30 May 1916**

**Son of William John and Louisa Mary Waterhouse, of "Ravelve," Totland Bay, Isle of Wight.  
Remembered with honour  
BAGHDAD (NORTH GATE) WAR CEMETERY**



The Rolls of Honour held at the Commission's Head Office commemorating by name all the Commonwealth casualties who died in Iraq during the two World Wars

**Commemorated in perpetuity by  
the Commonwealth War Graves Commission**

Name.	Corps.	Rank.	Regtl. No.
WATERHOUSE	R. F. A.	Capt	4517
	—	—	855359
Thos			

Medal.	Roll.	Page.	Remarks.
VICTORY	RFA/151B TF	10386	died 13. 6. 17
BRITISH	<del>do</del>		
15 STAR	(T)RFA/28A+B 3759		
Theatre of War first served in (1) France			
Date of entry therein 22. 3. 15			

K. 1380.

## Correspondence.

Address.