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The Fight for Kut Battle of Es-Sinn

Graphic Descriptions

A member of the 'Western Morning News' staff with the Kut Relief Force in Mesopotamia sends the following description of the attack on Es-Sinn of March 8th :-

When the deeds of Devon men in the world-war come to be collated, a front place must be given to the record of the Devon Territorials in their initial action on the far-off battlefields of Mesopotamia. The first Devonshire Territorial Infantry Battalion to be mobilized for active service and the first to go into action, they gallantly upheld the traditions of the Devonshire Regiment, but as has happened to Devons before and doubtless will again until all wars cease and the strife of battle is forever stilled, the battalion gained its laurels at terrible cost. In so few hours' fighting, even in this war of such wholesale slaughter, few battalions have paid so heavy a toll in officers.

Of the events leading up to, and the happenings in the action of the 6th, 8th-9th March, our eye-witness with the battalion writes that the regiment after an interval of rest at the advance base in Mesopotamia – reached after an exceptionally trying march of over 200 miles – spent a fortnight in the trenches at the Senna position. This was a period of comparative calm, broken only by daily visits of an hostile airman and an occasional affair of out-posts. A considerable amount of useful reconnaissance work was accomplished, however, all leading up to the ultimate attack on the Es-Sinn position. Occasionally, the battalion had an experience of flooded trenches, and the 29th February – the odd day in the year – was a particularly unpleasant one in this respect. The men, however, were by this time proof against hardship of this kind, and the health of the battalion was exceptionally good.

With the rest of the brigade, the Devons left the trenches just as evening was closing in on March 7th, and, marching all night reached the Dijailah Nullah early next morning tired out, and not expecting to immediately go into action. Each man, it should be remembered, was carrying two days' rations and a kit and ammunition weighing sixty pounds. Halting in the early morning, a few of the men were trying to snatch a little breakfast when the artillery commenced to shell some Turkish cavalry. Immediately a further supply of ammunition was served out, to be packed away in already bulging haversacks and pockets, and the battalion was moved up through the nullah to a more advanced position. The prospect of action dispelled all sense of fatigue, and the men interestedly watched the artillery, as they themselves were scattered in platoons over a big plain, which was presently so dotted with troops as to resemble a huge chessboard. Then the attack on the Dijailah Redoubt was launched. The Turks here were strongly entrenched, and while the assault was being delivered by British and Indian troops, the protection of the left flank was allotted to the Devons and an Indian battalion. This necessitated an advance in skirmishing order of approximately a mile and a half, under enfilading machine gun and rifle fire from the right, with a little sniping from the front. There were a lot of stray shots, too, apparently from the Turkish Redoubt, and a few men dropped wounded, but it was not a very serious affair. The men advanced as steadily as if performing battalion training on the Maidan at Lahore, and were admirably led. No enemy in force being discovered, the battalion had orders to retire from this position and reinforce the attack on the Redoubt. To do this the platoons and sections went back under a sniping fire to a point close to the Nullah. By this time it was about one o'clock, the sun had become very powerful, and the men's rolled overcoats on their backs were an intolerable burden, but the prospect of getting more "in the thick of it" was exhilarating, and the battalion reformed under a heavy sniping fire in a manner reflecting the highest credit on the ability of the officers and the training of the men. Then, without pause, the platoons advanced towards the redoubt shaking out into single line almost immediately, as they came at once under very hot rifle fire from the Turks' concealed trenches. The Turks' fire is largely unaimed, but this increased the volume of fire more than anything else, and he appeared to be well supplied with machine guns. By the

simple expedient of keeping below his trenches and laying his rifle along the top and firing, the Turk was able to sweep the whole ground over which the Devons advanced – a distance variously estimated up to two miles. In fact, well beyond this distance men and mules with the transport were killed by stray bullets. Considering the heat, the tremendously heavy frontal fire, and the disconcerting sniping from the flanks, the battalion made the advance in a manner which would be a credit to the best-trained regiments of the line.

Here the casualties commenced to get heavier, but still by short rushes the battalion advanced, dropping to take what scanty cover the ground afforded and going on again at the whistle, wonderfully cheerful. At a point some 300 yards from the Turkish position and where a slight rise in the ground afforded a little – though very little – natural protection the Devons held on side by side with Gurkhas, Sikhs, and Punjabis, and it being realised in face of the fire it would be impossible to advance further at the time, the men were ordered to seek what protection they could. A few had got a little beyond before this order came, and with them were the heaviest casualties. Side by side, officers and men, Briton and Indian, dug up bits of head cover under a terrible fire, the while waiting for the artillery behind, who were sending shells shrieking overhead to breach the Turkish trenches. The artillery themselves, however, were not having an easy time, for they were being shelled from the Turkish Redoubt, and the enemy shrapnel made it uncomfortable for them. So the afternoon went on, and in the short Eastern twilight as the frontal fire slackened the sniping from the flanks increased, any man moving making an excellent mark against the skyline in the half-light. When darkness fell the battalion dug themselves in, while some went out to collect wounded and bury the dead – operations which were carried out under continuous sniping mostly by Arabs firing antiquated, heavy-bore rifles. Some time after midnight, whilst the men were lying in their trenches exhausted by the fatigue of the day, the order came to retire to the Nullah. In almost pitch darkness the battalion formed up in fours and whilst men were collecting the wounded, who had been placed on stretchers, there was a sudden startling outbreak of machine gun and rifle fire from an advanced point in front of the Turkish position. For a few moments the scene was that of an inferno, but fortunately the Turks had not realised that a retirement was in progress, and their fire was badly aimed. The Devons were ordered to scatter, and whilst some replied to the Turkish fire others in small parties made their way back to the Nullah with wounded men. In the darkness it was difficult to be sure of the direction. The different detached sections were advised to join up with the strongest parties of troops they could find, and the result was that it was not until day-break that the men of the various units got together in the Nullah. The Devons were then detailed to convoy the wounded the 20 miles or so back to the base, and moved off under desultory shrapnel fire with a long string of carts and stretchers. It became evident that as water was scarce it had been thought expedient to make a general move back to the base, which was successfully accomplished, though as the column was shelled for breakfast so it was shelled for tea but fortunately without further casualties.

The base at Camp Wadi was reached by the battalion about 9 p.m. on the 9th, when many were ready to drop with sheer exhaustion, for added to the natural depression at the battalion's losses and the knowledge that circumstances had prevented for the time the attainment of the object set out to be achieved, was the fact that they had had no sleep for two nights, had marched some 40 miles, been in action continuously for roughly 20 hours, and hardly had one's pack off since working out from the trenches on the 7th.

The casualties need not be reiterated; sufficient is it to say officers and men went bravely to their death like Britishers. There is no need to individualize. All were recklessly courageous, but the pity of it is the end was not achieved. Those who were able from the artillery positions to watch the advance on the Redoubt spoke of the attack of the Devons as magnificent. No other word describes it. Lieut.-Col. N. R. Radcliffe, D.S.O., the officer commanding, parading the battalion a day or two later, after a feeling reference to the loss of the officers and men who had fallen, expressed his personal pride in the battalion, who, he said, in their first action had worthily upheld the traditions of the old "Bloody Eleventh". Lieut.-Gen. F. J. Aylmer, commanding the Tigris Army Corps, expressed his high appreciation of the gallantry and endurance of the troops and the following reference was communicated to the men in battalion orders on March 14th 1916:-

"The G. O. C. Tigris Army Corps wishes to convey to all ranks his high appreciation of the part taken by the battalion in the last battle, and thanks them for the great effort they made to secure a victory. The G. O. C. also wishes to convey to officers, N. C. O.s and men his sympathy in the loss of their brave comrades who so gallantly fell for their king and country, and for the honour and credit of their regiment."

LETTER FROM THE COLONEL

The parents of one of the officers of the . . . Devon regiment who fell in the fighting in Mesopotamia on March 8th have received a letter of sympathy from Colonel A. R. Radcliffe, commanding the regiment which contains the following information:-

“We had started at 6 p.m. the night before (the 7th), and marched all night about 18 miles the men carrying the enormous weight of about 56 pounds in ammunition, two days’ rations, etc., then we did about another seven miles that morning, fighting the whole time, and about one o’clock were diverted from our job to go to help the troops attacking this redoubt (the Dijailah Redoubt). The men were dead tired, and the officers, not carrying anything like the weight the men carried, at each rush got a little ahead of the men, and were at once picked out by the enemy, which accounts for the serious loss in officers. They were too brave, as the general told me after the fight; this was their only fault. General Gorringe, commanding the troops, came to our camp afterwards and thanked the regiment for their splendid behaviour which is some little consolation in our great loss.”

Comments on the article in the Western Morning News, published April 1916

Apart from the obvious attempt to raise the morale of the local population after the appalling and tragic disaster at the battle of Es-Sinn, the article has clearly been subjected to the attentions of the military censors at H.Q. Basra before being dispatched to the editor of the Western Morning News. All reports that on their arrival in their advanced position it was obvious that the Turkish trenches were virtually empty and open for the taking, and that beyond them the town of Kut could actually be seen through the haze are not reported. The artillery were not just shelling Arab horsemen - they had been ordered to register and taking their time all element of surprise was lost.

The censor would not allow the actual numbers of casualties to be reported. Instead, the report is reduced to *‘The casualties need not be reiterated; sufficient is it to say officers and men went bravely to their death like Britishers’*. In fact, 8 officers had been killed and 8 wounded, with the Medical Officer reported missing during the night 8th/9th. 22 men had been killed, 141 wounded and 22 were missing. The proportion of the dead to the wounded is significant: the Turks were firing along the ground from their concealed trenches, so that casualties occurred more in leg than chest injuries. If, together with the circumstance of the muddle and delay together with the loss of surprise and the complete waste of the cavalry had been known at home there would have been an outcry. The suicidal attack made by ‘C’ Company in a hopeless attempt to renew the attack was likewise covered up.

The statement that 'It became expedient that as water was scarce it had been thought expedient to make a general move back to base' was the very poor excuse concocted by the war-office to try and explain why the battle failed to achieve the break-through. It became the official version issued to the press and appeared in all the national newspapers, as a cover-up of the blunders and tragic mistakes that could not be revealed to the public. It is recounted that when this was read by the front-line troops in Mesopotamia, it was greeted with total disbelief and much anger.

The gallantry and devoted courage of the 6th Battalion are beyond question, their sacrifice immense. One can only hope that the article in the Western Morning news was some comfort to the parents, wives, siblings and sweethearts of those who were killed, wounded and maimed.