

The Road to Basra - 1914

Introduction

The following article by Christopher Trevelyan is from the website For the King-Emperor - The Indian Army on Campaign during the Edwardian & Georgian eras 1901-1947.

I have largely retained the original text, but supplemented it with individual notes and additions, including not least a map, which should make it easier to keep track of the details. The article does not contain any source information, which is why the ones listed here are only my sources.



The current operational area marked on a map from Source 1.

Introduction

Although Great Britain had maintained very friendly relations with the Ottoman Empire throughout the nineteenth century, even at one point going to war to preserve Ottoman territorial integrity, a rift between the two powers had developed towards the end of the century under the leadership of Prime Minister William Gladstone. As a result, Britain's influence over the Ottoman Empire began to decline, and Germany slowly emerged as the new friend and ally of the Turks for the twentieth century. Although German influence in the Turkish Government can be traced back to 1875, close political and economic ties did not reach fruition until roughly 1900. The most famous example of which was the proposed German financed Berlin-Baghdad Railway, which was finally agreed upon to begin construction in 1903.

With the approach of the Great War, it was hoped in both India and Britain that Turkey would remain neutral in the conflict. Although the majority of Turks, even within the Government, preferred a policy of neutrality, a small but influential pro-German war party led by the charismatic Enver Pasha saw a major new global war as an opportunity to revitalize the Ottoman Empire through the defeat Russia and the end of European intervention in the Middle East. Being aware of the plotting of Enver Pasha and the influence of Germany over the Turkish Government, Britain had no choice but to prepare to defend her interests in

the region should it come to war. One such area of interest was the Persian Gulf.

British Indian interest in the Persian Gulf region can be traced back to 1622, when the Honourable East India Company signed an agreement with Persia in which the Company would use its navy to defend the Gulf and expel the Portuguese, who had established a trading monopoly in the region. Since that early beginning, the security of Persia and the Gulf had been of great importance to the Indian Government for two main reasons. These were the continued preservation of the free and unmolested trade of Indian and British shipping (the Gulf had been dominated by 'Trucial' [1](#)) Arab pirates for over a century, until three Honourable East India Company military expeditions forced them to sue for peace in 1819) and the prevention of any other European power, in particular Russia, from establishing its influence anywhere near India, including Persia.

The Persian Gulf gained even more importance to Great Britain when oil was discovered in southwest Persia in 1908. To harvest this valuable resource, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was established in 1909, and a great pipeline was built from the Persian oilfields to a refinery located on Abadan Island in the Shatt-al-Arab (the single river that connects the Tigris and Euphrates to the Persian Gulf.) In 1912, the importance of Persian oil became even more pronounced when the Royal Navy switched from coal to oil as its primary source of fuel. It was thus decided in Great Britain that if Turkey should side with Germany in the approaching war, the Persian oilfields should be secured, and this would be the task of the Indian Government as Persia and the Gulf were well within its traditional sphere of influence.

Expeditionary Force 'D'

By September 1914, it had become clear that Turkey was preparing for war, and it was only a matter of time before she entered the conflict on Germany's side. In anticipation, three Royal Navy vessels, the *HMS Odin*, the *HMS Espiegle* and the *HMS Dalhousie* entered the Shatt-al-Arab in order to protect the Abadan Island oil refineries. Soon thereafter, on October 7th, a formal letter from the Turkish Government was delivered to the *HMS Espiegle* essentially stating that the RN ships were violating Turkish sovereignty and that they must depart from the Shatt-al-Arab within 24 hours. The British however, were unwilling to leave their interests defenceless, and in any event, since one bank of the Shatt belonged to Persia, Turkey's control over it was not absolute. Throughout the rest of October, the Turks and the Royal Navy sat in an uneasy peace, with both sides hurriedly preparing for the war they knew was coming. On October 31st, the Commander of the *Espiegle* learnt through a telegram that the Turkish Navy had bombarded the Russian port of Odessa in the Black Sea on October 28th, thus effectively declaring war. On November 5th, Great Britain officially declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The very next day, the *HMS Espiegle* engaged and silenced a significant body of Turks who had constructed a series of trenches opposite Abadan Island in a hotly contested affair. The war in Mesopotamia had begun.



*Brigadier-General
W.S. Delamain,
C.B., D.S.O.,*

Indian Army.

Back in India, preparations had well been underway to send Indian Army contingents throughout the Empire. The largest to set sail was Expeditionary Force 'A', whose destination was to be the fields of France and Flanders. Other contingents were sent to German East Africa (Expeditionary Force 'B'), Egypt, and numerous other corners of the Empire. Mesopotamia was of course also on the list of theatres requiring the presence of the Indian Army. Before Turkey attacked Russia, and while the Royal Navy prepared for war in the Shatt-al-Arab, the 16th Infantry Brigade (2nd Bn. Dorsetshire Regiment., 20th Duke of Cambridge's Own Infantry (Brownlow's Punjabis, 104th Wellesley's Rifles, 117th Mahrattas and 1st Indian Mountain Artillery Brigade (23rd (Peshawar) Battery (Frontier Force) and 30th Battery [2](#))) (a total of 4,731 officers and men), departed from Bombay and set sail for Mesopotamia on October 16th, under the command of Brigadier-General W.S. Delamain [3](#)).

This was the advanced striking force of Expeditionary Force 'D'. General Delamain's instructions were to occupy Abadan Island in order to protect the oil refineries there, cover the landing of reinforcements, and assure local Arabs of British support for them against the Turks. It was estimated that there were as many as 15,000 Turkish soldiers and gendarmerie throughout Mesopotamia, while as many as 8,000 infantry, 500 cavalry and 58 guns were located in southern Mesopotamia and at Basra (the Turkish 38th Division and the 26th Regiment). The level of training of these soldiers was thought to be poor, and the quality of their equipment was also considered to be poor.

The Opening Rounds of the Mesopotamia Campaign

After the coast had been cleared of mines, and under the cover of the guns of the *HMS Odin*, Delamain's first objective was to capture the town and fort of Fao, which was located at the mouth of the Shatt-al-Arab. On November 6th, the same day that the *Espiegle* was engaging Turkish troops up the Shatt, a small contingent of Marines supported by 2 mountain guns, and three companies of infantry (made up of the Dorsets, 117th Mahrattas, and 20th Punjabis) landed four miles above the fort, and captured an important telegraph station. Following this, the force advanced south, captured the fort at Fao without opposition, and then re-embarked leaving behind a company of the 117th as a garrison.

With the mouth of the Shatt-al-Arab secured, Delamain's next move was to proceed up the Shatt in order to secure Abadan Island. Two days after the landing at Fao, and with few Turks in sight, Delamain chose Sanniya, which was located two and a half miles north of Abadan Island on the Turkish side, to land his force. Over the next two days, the 16th Brigade proceeded to successfully disembark, albeit with some difficulty due to strong winds and totally inadequate landing craft. By November 10th, Force 'D' was entirely landed. Unlike the initial landing attempt of Expeditionary Force 'B' in German East Africa, which was an unmitigated disaster, the first moves of Force 'D' went without a hitch. A potentially dangerous amphibious assault in hostile territory was conducted without the enemy causing any loss of life and with Delamain effectively fulfilling his first objective.

It would not be long however, for the Turks to make their presence felt. On November 11th, Delamain learnt from Sheik Mohammerah, a British ally that a Turkish force of roughly 600 men with artillery under the command of Sami Bey planned to attack at dawn. As a result, when the Turks did strike at approximately 5:30, General Delamain was prepared for them. The bulk of the attack stuck one company of the 117th Mahrattas that was located in an old mud fort. The 117th had 'no difficulty holding their position', and a counter-attack by the 20th Punjabis amongst a grove of date palms drove off the Turks, who suffered at least 80 casualties. Two British officers were wounded (one died later), one Indian was killed and two Indian officers and five Indian other ranks were also wounded. Delamain initially wanted to pursue the fleeing Turks, but not having heard news of any reinforcements, he prudently decided that his small force should remain on the defensive near Abadan Island to protect the facilities there.

Reinforcements for Force 'D'



*Lieutenant-General
Sir A.A. Barrett, K.C.B.,
K.C.V.O., Indian Army.*

General Delamain did not however, have to wait for long to hear from his expected reinforcements. On November 13th, he received news that General Sir A.A.Barrett had arrived with the 10th Brigade RFA (63rd, 76th and 82nd Batteries), the 18th Infantry Brigade (2nd Bn. Norfolk Regiment, 7th Duke of Connaught's Own Rajputs, 110th Mahratta Light Infantry, 120th Rajputana Infantry), the 48th Pioneers, two squadrons of the 33rd (Queen Victoria's Own) Light Cavalry [4](#) and supporting elements [5](#) (a total of 7,046 officers and men).

General Barrett took over command from General Delamain (who remained in command of the 16th Brigade) and brought with him orders to go beyond simply protecting Abadan Island; the new objective of Force 'D' was the capture of Basra. As the first step towards that goal, reconnaissance patrols had revealed that the Turks, estimated at 1,200 men with 3 machine guns and 4 mountain guns, were building up at Saihan, which was only about four miles from the British camp. It was decided at once to dislodge this force.

The task fell upon General Delamain, and he took with him the Dorsets, 104th Rifles and the 30th Mountain Battery, while the 20th Punjabis and 23rd Mountain Battery formed up as his reserve. On the morning of the 15th, as his force neared Saihan, the Turks opened fire with machine guns, rifle fire and artillery at roughly 1,200 yards. Delamain ordered the 104th to take the Turk's left flank, which they did in 'capital style' under the covering fire of the 23rd Mountain Battery. At that time, the Dorsets joined in, and with the support the 20th Punjabis who had also moved up into the fray, they boldly and successfully rushed the Turks, who had been putting up significant resistance. Soon thereafter, after a period of slow but steady advance, the three battalions captured the Turkish camp, and destroyed most of the supplies and equipment that the Turks had left there. Fearing the possibility of Turkish reinforcements, and given that his orders were to dislodge the Turks without becoming too heavily engaged, General Delamain ordered his force to withdraw, which they did without harassment. After the engagement, it became clear that the Turkish force actually numbered over 3,100, of which roughly 160 became casualties. The British force suffered 9 killed, with another 53 wounded. Saihan was a clear British victory - an attacking force roughly half the size of the entrenched Turk defenders essentially ploughed through the Turkish left flank and captured their camp without facing any reverses of note.

Two days later, after the Anglo-Indian reinforcements had finally been disembarked, it was decided to strike with full force at the Turks, who had by then fallen back roughly five miles up the Shatt-al-Arab to

Sahil, with the remainder of their force still further north at Baljaniya [6](#). Upon approach, it became evident that the Turks, numbering roughly 3,500 with 12 guns and 1,000 Arab allies, had entrenched along a roughly three mile stretch between an old Mosque near the town of Zain and an old mud fort near Sahil further south. Under covering fire of the RN vessels in the Shatt-al-Arab, and enduring a couple of rainfall downpours that turned the sand into mud, the 18th Brigade under General Fry attacked the centre and north of the Turkish line, with the objective of taking the old Mosque. The 16th Brigade under General Delamain, fighting shoulder to shoulder with the 18th Brigade, attacked the centre and south of the Turkish line, with the objective of taking the old Fort. In the ensuing assault, the Anglo-Indian troops faced a heavy barrage of rifle fire from the Turkish line. Over the next several hours, the British assault made slow but steady progress, with the occasional rush, most notably again by the Dorsets. Eventually, after throwing all of his reserves into the assault, the flanking movements of Delamain's 16th Brigade forced the Turks to abandon the fort, while further north up the line, the predominantly Arab force took flight, leaving the British in possession of the field. It was a decisive Turkish defeat; they suffered between 1,500 and 2,000 casualties, while another 150 became prisoners of war. The British lost 4 officers, 21 British and 29 Indian other ranks killed and 17 British officers, 4 Indian officers, 186 British and 228 Indians wounded.



10-pdr BL Mountain Gun (2,75-inch), cirka 1914 [7](#).

The pamphlet was put into use in 1901 and had a maximum firing range of approx. 5 km. It was unstable during shooting, as it completely lacked a recoil brake.

An improved version - the 2.75in BL Mountain Gun - was phased in from 1912. At the outbreak of war, the batteries in the colonies and the Territorial Army still only had pamphlets of the older model.

It must therefore be assumed that the two batteries were equipped with leaflets of an older model.

Basra

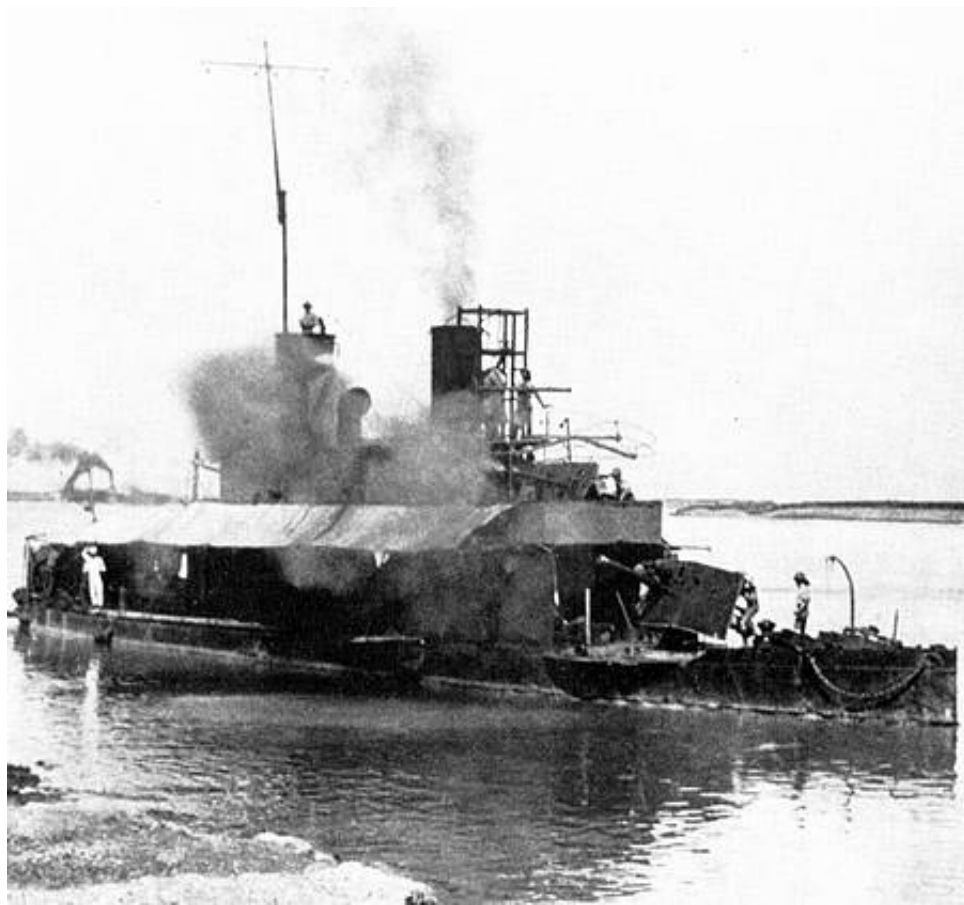
General Barrett immediately began to make preparations to continue the offensive against the Turks at *Baljaniya*, when on November 20th he received news from Sheik Mohammerah that as a result of their defeat at *Sahil*, the Turks had not only abandoned *Baljaniya*, but also *Basra*, and had retreated to *Amara* well up the *Tigris River*. This news was soon confirmed, and it was also learnt that widespread looting had broken out in *Basra*. Accordingly, on November 21st, the *HMS Espiegle* and *HMS Odin* carefully navigated past a nearly complete obstruction made up of a number of ships sunk by the Turks in the *Shatt*, and arrived at *Basra*. They found the *Basra* customs house engulfed in flames, and rampant looting throughout the city, which was at once put to an end by a naval landing party. The next morning, looting began again, and it was again brought to an end by another naval landing party. By noon, General

Barrett's main force had reached *Basra* after a long and tiring night march. *Basra* was officially occupied on November 23rd with a ceremonial parade and the raising of the Union Jack over the city. Sir Percy Cox, the chief political agent with Expeditionary Force 'D' publicly read in Arabic an official statement of British intentions...

The British Government has now occupied Basra, but though a state of war with the Ottoman Government still prevails, yet we have no enmity or ill-will against the population, to whom we hope to prove good friends and protectors. No remnant of Turkish administration now remains in the region. In place thereof the British flag had been established, under which you will enjoy the benefits of liberty and justice, both in regards to your religious and secular affairs.

Expeditionary Force 'D' had proven to be far more successful than anyone imagined. The 'ever victorious army' as it would become known, had managed to capture a major Turkish city without a single defeat along the way and with relatively few casualties. In India, the success of 'D' led some to begin to dream of a greater prize - Baghdad.

Meanwhile, in Constantinople, Enver Pasha was incensed at the loss of Basra, and decided that the Anglo-Indian force must be removed for good from Mesopotamia. He therefore at once dispatched the troops required to do just that. Although Basra was secured by the British in November 1914, it was yet to be seen if Force 'D' could withstand the 25,000 man strong Turkish counter-attack that would hit them hard at Shaiba in the not so distant future.



English gunboat of the Fly class on the Tigris.
Fra Kilde 3.

Om flodkanonbåde

HMS *Odin* and *Espiegle* (built 1901-1903) were equipped with 4 4" guns and 2-3 machine guns.

HMS *Dalhousie* was of older date and had a past in the Royal Indian Marine (8). Then Naval Lieutenant Cuthbert Helsham Heath-Caldwell, who was assigned to the ship on 26 September 1914, described it as

"... thirty years old, and could neither fight nor run away." Information on armament is not available.

Jane's Fighting Ships 1919 shows an indistinct picture of HMS Cadmus, which was of the same class as HMS Odin and Espiegle.

Until pictures of the original vessels appear, pictures of the Fly (=fly) class used from 1915 must serve as illustrations.

Fly class included: Blackfly, Butterfly, Caddisfly, Cranefly, Dragonfly, Firefly, Gadfly, Greenfly, Greyfly, Hoverfly, Mayfly, Sawfly, Sedgefly, Snakefly, Stonefly og Waterfly.

The main armament consisted of a 4" gun on the foredeck, while the secondary armament was a 12-pdr gun mounted on the upper deck. In addition, the gunboats were armed with 5-8 machine guns. The crew consisted of 22 men. Top speed was 9.5 knots/ The vessels were mostly flat-bottomed.

Under construction, the gunboats were codenamed China Gunboats to hide their destination - Mesopotamia. In service here they were designated River Monitors.

For further pictures of the Fly class and other vessels on the Euphrates and Tigris, refer to The Royal Navy's Tigris and Euphrates River Gunboats, from which the above information about the Fly class also comes.



*4" cannon mounted on the foredeck of HMS Firefly.
Fra Kilde 3.*

The infrastructure in Mesopotamia was modest and large parts of the country were not even mapped.

During the later operations, the Euphrates and Tigris rivers therefore came to play a major role, as in many cases they were the only viable supply routes.

6th (Poona) Infantry Division pr. september 1914

16th (Poona) Brigade

2nd Bn. Dorsetshire Regiment

20th Duke of Cambridge's Own Infantry (Brownlow's Punjabis)

104th Wellesley's Rifles

17th (Ahmednagar) Brigade

1st Bn. Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

22nd Punjabis

103rd Mahratta Light Infantry

117th Mahrattas

18th (Belgaum) Brigade

2nd Bn. Norfolk Regiment

7th Duke of Connaught's Own Rajputs

110th Mahratta Light Infantry

120th Rajputana Infantry

Medical Corps

16th (British) Field Ambulance

17th (British) Field Ambulance

125th (Indian) Field Ambulances

126th (Indian) Field Ambulances

127th (Indian) Field Ambulances

19th Combined Clearing Hospital

57th (Indian) Stationary Hospital

3rd (British) General Hospital

9th (Indian) General Hospital

119th Infantry (The Mooltan Regiment)

Artillery

10th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery

(63rd, 76th & 82nd Batteries)

6th Ammunition Column, Royal Field Artillery

1st Mountain Artillery Brigade

(23rd (Peshawar) & 30th Battery)

Divisional Train

Divisional Supply Column

7th Mule Corps

10th Mule Corps

12th Mule Corps

13th Mule Corps

30th Mule Corps

52nd Camel Corps

Kolat Camel Corps

Las Bela Camel Corps

Khaipur Camel Corps

Jaipur Cart Transport Train

(The overview is primarily based on Source 6.)

Kilder

1. *A History of the British Cavalry 1816-1919, Volume 6: Mesopotamia, 1914-1918* af The Marquess of Anglesey, Leo Cooper, London 1996, ISBN 0-85052-433-4.
2. *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery - Forgotten Fronts and Home Base, 1914-18* af Sir Martin Farndale, Royal Artillery Institution, London 1988, ISBN 1-870114-05-1.
3. Artikler af Oberstløjtnant A.J. Baker i *History of the First World War, Volume 3, No. 9 og No. 10*, Purnell, BPC Publishing Ltd., London 1970.
4. *India's Army* af Donovan Jackson, Purnell and Sons, London 1940.
5. *The Indian Army 1914-1947* af Ian Summer, Osprey Elite 72, London 2001, ISBN 1-84176-196-6.
6. *The Indian Expeditionary Force 'D' og The 6th (Poona) Division*, The Story of the British Army in the Great War.

Per Finsted

Noter:

1) The Trucial States was the name of the United Arab Emirates until 1971. For further information see e.g. article on The Free Dictionary.

2) Each battery consisted of 302 men, 164 mules and 6 2.75-inch Mountain Gun that was carried on the mules. The artillery division was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel H.D. Grier, with the majors E.E. Edlmann and H.J. Cotter as commander of the 23rd and 30th Battery respectively. (Source

3) The force also included the Brigade Signal Section, 22nd Company/3rd Sappers and Miners, 125th Combined Field Ambulance (3 Indian platoons and 1 English platoon) as well as the 13th Mule Corps (plus a commando from the 12th Mule Corps). (Source 6.)

4) The mounted force consisted of 4 English and 6 Indian officers, 216 non-commissioned officers and privates, as well as 20 native followers (followers), 236 horses and 8 camels. (Source 1.)

5) *These included the 6th (Poona) Divisional Headquarters and the 17th Field Company/3rd Sappers & Miners.* (Source 2.) The division's third brigade - 17th (Ahmednagar) Brigade - did not arrive in the area of operations until late November 1914 - after the capture of Basra.

6) Baljaniya is approximately midway between Sahil and Basra.

7) From *British Artillery Weapons & Ammunition 1914-1918* by Ian V. Hogg and L.F. Thurston, Ian Allan Ltd., Surrey 1972, SBN 7110-0381-5.

8) The Royal Indian Marine was originally the naval force of the East India Company - the Bombay Marine. In the current period, the force had tasks in the near coastal defense of India, while the British navy handled the external tasks. Information about the Indian Navy can be found e.g. on the Indian Navy website.