CTESIPHON

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Indian Medical Services

BAGHDAD! The very name was our undoing! After a victorious advance of almost 500 miles up the Tigris under General Townshend we were in November 1915 arrayed in battle order south of the fabled Caliph's city hovering between illusion and reality only twenty miles away. It seemed almost within our grasp, a glittering prize.

The War had not been doing well elsewhere. Our armies in Flanders, in spite of prodigious efforts, were bogged down in senseless holocaust. We were failing in the Dardanelles and in other theatres. To relieve the gloom and depression and to boost morale a spectacular success was needed and sought for by the British Government and the Government of India. The capture of Baghdad could provide just that. The gamble was on!

Townshend's force now consisted of the 6th (Indian) Division reinforced by part of an extra brigade which included two Punjabi battalions and the 2/7th Gurkhas. We were concentrated by 20 November among tamarind and casuarina woods at a small Arab village called Lajj, and from here we got our first view across the flat plain of the historic old Arch of Ctesiphon.

This Arch, whose image is so indelibly stamped on my memory, is the remains of the sixth century palace of Chosroes, a famous Persian King and statesman. It is a segment of the great banqueting hall of which the sides have fallen down (it is now a show sight for world tourists). Rising to a height of almost a hundred feet it forms a conspicuous and imposing feature in the flat landscape. There are other indications of the Sassanian city that occupied the site by the river in the form of mounds; the most obvious was a high angular ridge known to us during the battle as High Wall which at the beginning of the battle lay together with the Arch and the Arab village of Sulman Pak behind the right of the Turkish trenches stretching to the river bank and its fringe of date palms close by.

A few days before the great battle, little Second/Lieutenant Venis sadly confided to me that he had been re-posted to a different company in the regiment from the one commanded by the big blond Major Riddell to whom he was passionately devoted. We were in fact a trio who had shared several actions and experiences during the campaign in close association, and I vividly recall his undisguised and emotional delight on the very eve of the battle at being re-posted to Riddell's company, fore-shadowing the tragedy that was to follow.

The Turkish Army facing us was estimated at 18,000 regulars, and an uncertain number of Arab semi-organized formations of infantry and cavalry, with about 52 field guns. Our knowledge of their strength, defences and dispositions had been gathered by spies, cavalry reconnaissance and the observations of our two small aeroplanes, but most unfortunately one of these, flown by a Major Reilly, returning with the latest news and charts two days before the battle had had engine trouble and had been captured. Not only were we deprived of vital information about

entirely new extensions and reinforcements away on the Turkish left flank but they in turn obtained details of recent seasonal alterations in the main course and sand-banks of the Tigris below them. We did however know that there was an especially strong system of redoubts and trenches protecting their left (desert) flank, labelled by Townshend as V.P. or Vital Point, as on its capture depended the whole outcome. Another formidable strong point was Water Redoubt near the centre of their position guarded by a 6 foot water channel. I have vivid and tragic recollections of Water Redoubt.

Our naval strength had just been increased by the arrival of a new-type and business-like river monitor, the Firefly, of shallow draught, good speed and fire-power. Its brief but gallant career lasted with us a bare ten days before ending in

disaster. The paddle yacht *Comet* and smaller gun-carrying tugs bearing 4 inch naval guns together with a battery of howitzers throwing high-explosive shells which raised a heartening cloud of sand and yellow smoke on landing all added to our artillery power. Transport as throughout the campaign depended on our tough mules, in pairs pulling the even tougher indestructible springless mule carts.

We marched out from Lajj on the night of 21 November 1915 in four diverging columns. Our column was on the left and we followed the line of telegraph poles carrying wires all the way from Aleppo in Syria to Bushire on the Persian Gulf, but now of course silent. Our objective was the group of trenches in front of the Arch.

About midnight we reached our designated position, taking up battle alignment and awaiting in cold discomfort and for me at least excitement tempered with anxiety for the crunch to come. A cold, dark desert night, no lights allowed, reliance on direction by compass bearing.

We moved into attack at first light making towards the Arch looming up in the faint light far ahead, advancing fast in orthodox extended order, I with my stretcher party and medical haversack but without mules, close behind the second line. As daylight strengthened we saw the whole plain on our right filled with our troops steadily advancing with only a few shrapnel bursts above them. But soon the roar of battle awoke with increasing intensity everywhere. The enemy trenches were clearly indicated by the massed puffs of our shrapnel shells and the tremendous yellow flashes as our howitzers opened up on V.P. We on our part began to come under considerable shell and long-range rifle fire from our left and front. I found it, as before, terrifying to see the little puffs of sand as the bullets hit the ground close by and the wicked whine of the riccos singing past, with still enough force to destroy you.

Meanwhile, far away on our right in the desert our cavalry column had gone under considerable shell and rifle fire and had lost many horses, poor brutes, and failed to attain its objective of passing behind the trenches of the Turkish left flank, further out than we had calculated. Their dismounted fire was of course almost useless.

The assault on V.P. by Delamain's brigade was carried out with the utmost daring and gallantry in face of withering fire from the Turks, always so sturdy in their trenches, under the maximum artillery barrage from every battery we could safely bring to bear. The leading troops were the 2/7th Gurkhas and the 24th Punjabis and both suffered heavy casualties. The little Gurkhas rushed to the attack, using their kukries to slash through the barbed wire and in the hand-to-hand fighting in the trenches. Their colonel, a huge man with white hair and a bright-red face, is credited with demoralising the defenders by the roaring ferocity of his language when inextricably caught up in the wire entanglement.

Communications had meanwhile become broken between the brigades on our right and ours on the left flank. It appears that Townshend understood we had overrun the Turkish position in front of High Wall and the Arch and thus that the formidable Water Redoubt could be pinched between our brigade and the troops which had captured V.P. He therefore despatched a scout ordering our Brigadier

to turn his attack to the right for Water Redoubt. At that moment, my battalion with the 43rd (Oxford and Bucks) were fully committed on a frontal attack on trenches near the Arch. It is a great tribute to these troops that the extremely difficult manoeuvre of changing the direction of its attack to half-right in mid-career was rapidly performed without more than a small amount of confusion and the attack continued, but the result was that we got heavily enfiladed by having to pass for nearly a mile at a distance of a few hundred yards in front of the Turkish trenches till we came up against the still-intact Water Redoubt.

At this critical moment I felt a terrific thump on the left side of my head which knocked me giddily to the ground with the world going round in circles. For the moment I thought I had 'had it' as putting my hand to my ear I found it covered with blood. In point of fact a bullet had gone through my ear and banged against the mastoid bone where the balancing apparatus is housed. Fortunately, the horizon soon returned to normal and with a bandage hastily applied by my assistant I was able to follow up in a short time almost none the worse.

Meanwhile, Water Redoubt had fallen to a final bayonet charge led by our colonel and adjutant, the only unwounded British officers who with a handful of our sepoys had been the first to rush the Turkish trench full of Turks, who seemed at first a bit uncertain as who was surrendering to whom! The question was soon settled by the arrival of more and more sepoys and a large number of Turks were quickly disarmed and herded off to the rear.

I can never forget the heart-rending scene in front of the redoubt. The plain around was dotted thick with fallen figures, some stretched out motionless, others rolling about in agony and distress, a few walking, hobbling or staggering about. Among the dead was a quiet temporary officer of my regiment still grasping his revolver, a gesture that evidently put courage into his heart in leading his men. His company commander had already been killed early in the attack.

Not far off, within a few yards of the Turkish wire, a feeble cry attracted me to poor little Venis, shot through the body, paralysed and sinking fast. When I got to him all he did, in spite of his agony, was to point out a figure lying face-downwards just ahead of him and cry in a broken voice 'Oh! Spackie, they've killed Riddell!', and there indeed was Riddell, shot through head and body, his fair hair clotted with blood and sand. I gave the poor boy a strong shot of morphia and he died in a few minutes with his head on my knee.

He was a bit of a character, having joined us from the Indian Army Reserve, just before the battle of Shaiba in the preceding April. Very small and looking like a jockey, he had a jaunty, almost cheeky manner not entirely approved of by the Colonel. His father was a planter in Mergui off the Burma coast and he tried to give the impression of being irresistible by the female sex, his humorous conversation much interspersed with comments and gestures tending to support this idea. His Burmese servant, one Maung Shwee ('munshi' to our mess staff) was rather hot tempered and liable to produce a kriss if provoked which got him into trouble at times, but a good sort of servant to have.

My regiment had lost 60 per cent in dead and wounded. All the Indian officers except one had become casualties and of our ten British officers four were killed

and four wounded. Among many horrifying sights was a fine young Sikh sepoy I knew well, sitting up and signing to me. The whole of his lower jaw had been shot clean away and the stump of his tongue was hanging. He indicated he wanted a sip of water, but he could not swallow. In all we had suffered 4,593 casualties out of a force of 10,000. Behind us we had almost no reserves, reinforcements having only just reached Busra at the mouth of the river.

I still had most of my small squad of stretcher bearers and as we were near Water Redoubt I began to collect the wounded there. It afforded at least a source of water, pretty stagnant and we had to throw out several dead men. There was a temporary lull in this part of the battle about noon but as I was the only front line doctor still able to function I had many casualties of other units to deal with. By early afternoon I had about two hundred lying around the Redoubt and was quite exhausted in trying to cope. To my intense relief just then Padre Spooner (a brother of the famous cricketer) rode up on a mule. He was attached to Colonel Donegan's Field Ambulance and had been sent forward to find a suitable place for the Ambulance to set itself up. I sent him back at the gallop and when the Ambulance mules and carts arrived I lost no time in handing over.

In a previous battle, at Shaiba, my nerves were steadied by taking off my Red Cross brassard and borrowing a rifle to loose off a clip of cartridges at the advancing Turks. Now at Ctesiphon my head stretcher bearer turned up at Water Redoubt looking rather ashamed and carrying a rifle.

'Havildar Dayal Singh', I said, 'where have you been?' 'Sahib,' he replied, 'my friend Mohan Singh was killed and you were hit. It was no good being a stretcher bearer, so I took a rifle and went on.' I found he had joined a handful of sepoys and been one of the first into the Turkish trenches. In spite of the bad example he set to the stretcher bearers under his charge he was given an award for gallantry and promoted.

It seemed to me, though I was too junior and diffident to say so, that the practice of sending Regimental Medical Officers' into battle in the second line of their regiments was foolish. We, expensively trained and difficult to replace, incurred almost as great a risk of being killed or wounded as the combatants, and what we could do in battle was no more than put on a 'first aid dressing' and in suitable cases give a morphine injection. It was argued that our presence with the troops gave them confidence, but quite often a unit went into action with a medical officer who had only just joined them. In my case I had been with the 48th Pioneers since we were mobilized in India and up to this battle my luck had been in: other Regimental Medical Officers had been killed. The policy was changed soon after and doctors functioned further back under better conditions.

I was now working with Donegan's Ambulance but was so overwrought that when they gave me a mug of excellent hot soup I brought it straight up again. Donegan (trust a good Irishman to know what's needed!) produced from one of his panniers a half-bottle of champagne and he poured me out a glass, naturally keeping me company with a similar amount. Never have I had a more marvellous drink! Almost one might say it saved my life, for soon after I took a good cup of soup and a dish of stew (Irish!) and fell asleep in spite of the battle flaring up

again as a Turkish counter-attack was beaten off. Where we were we could easily have been overrun as there was a gap in our hastily organized defence line.

When, fully restored, I rejoined my unit the next day at dawn, the 23rd November 1915, the picture was far from reassuring. Although the main Turkish position was in our hands, the village of Sulman Pak near the Arch and towards the Tigris held actively hostile and menacing troops freshly arrived by river transport from Baghdad, and on the opposite flank beyond V.P. a counter-attack was again threatened. We were also embarrassed by 1,300 prisoners we had on our hands from the previous day. Hoghton's brigade of which we were a part had suffered frightful losses. His Brigade Major was a Company Sergeant Major of the Oxford and Bucks. I well remember Colonel Lethbridge of that gay and historic regiment (whom I knew so well at Ahmednagar just before the war) walking up and down at his regimental concentration post a picture of grim woe, having lost so many of his fine officers and gallant men already in the unfinished battle.

The next job I was detailed for was to go over to V.P. and help evacuate the wounded there. I was not very clear as to the exact direction to take but started out hopefully early next morning following the line of Turkish trenches, but these were in such a mess with water, mud, half-buried bodies of friend and foe and barbed wire that I preferred to risk it in the open as there seemed to be only occasional enemy sniping going on. I got a bit off bearing until yelled at sternly and told to get down into the trench which turned out to be one of the V.P. network.

We all set to work protected by a slight ridge loading up the mule carts with wounded and sending them off across the rough track in batches, poor devils. As soon as they got out into the open they came under a bit of shell fire and some of the mules took fright and bolted, fortunately in the right direction towards the river, but it must have been hell for the wounded all lumped together in the springless carts.

Many of these frightful battle wounds never reached the Field Hospitals alive, much less the Base Hospitals, and every wound seemed more shocking in the open battlefield away from the professional atmosphere and equipment needed to deal with them. When they reached the river that evening they were loaded as close together as possible on to the open iron decks of the barges. Many did not get even a change of dressing till they got down to Basra over a week later. There was a great scandal about it but I do not think the blame could in any way be placed on the medical staff in the field units, overwhelmed with work in most difficult conditions.

Away on the left flank by the river a tactically important mound (Gurkha Mound) was captured by assault by the 2/7th Gurkhas to protect that area from a threat by newly arrived Turkish troops. How those little Gurkhas with their short legs got across from V.P. away on our right to High Wall and Gurkha Mound on our extreme left I do not know (my little men can fight, but do not expect them to march great distances as well). In this area the enemy were unable to make any effective counter-attack. The Turk is a gallant and stubborn fighter in his trenches but lacks good leadership in attack in the open. Moreover, our naval guns were

close and in great form when any target presented. Out in the desert flank on the other hand our ammunition supplies began to run short due to mule casualties. In consequence it became necessary to concentrate our forces behind High Wall and close to the Tigris to reorganise in comparative peace.

There was an ominous calm on the 25th November and in the regiments we felt an atmosphere of uncertainty as to what the next move would be, though I believe a short retirement to our nearest base at Lajj had been decided upon.

That evening I climbed up the steep side of High Wall where we had good observation over the late battlefield. The Arch and Sulman Pak village were quite close on our left, still in Turkish hands. In the distance towards Baghdad, a line of low sand hills indicated where the Diyala river ran to join the Tigris and it was in this direction that everyone's gaze was anxiously directed, and sure enough after a while we could make out with glasses in the wavering heat haze a column of troops winding its way through the distant sand hills towards us and soon after another column could also be picked up. These could only be Turks! How awkward it would be if they outflanked us and reached the river below our present position! We were entirely dependent on the river boats for bringing up all our supplies and for evacuating our wounded and sick. We received without surprise orders to march immediately back to Lajj.

So now at last we had to confess within our hearts a sense of frustration, even of despondency, of barren toil and bitter loss, as we retreated back across the weary plain to fight our desperate rearguard actions, back to our advanced base at Kut-el-Amara for a five month's siege ending in starvation, surrender and the horrors of the thousand miles march up into Anatolia, thirty months in captivity from which so few of us returned.

Biography

Colonel W. C. Spackman, after taking part in the Battle of Ctesiphon was besieged in Kut-el-Amara for five months, captured and imprisoned in Turkey for thirty months. His diary of the siege of Kut-el-Amara is in the Imperial War Museum.

Colonel Spackman spent thirty years in India only leaving on partition. He died in 1975 at the age of 86 years.