

Local Casualties of a Forgotten War in Iraq

WENDY PEARSE: Wychwoods Local History Journal No 18,

Published 2003

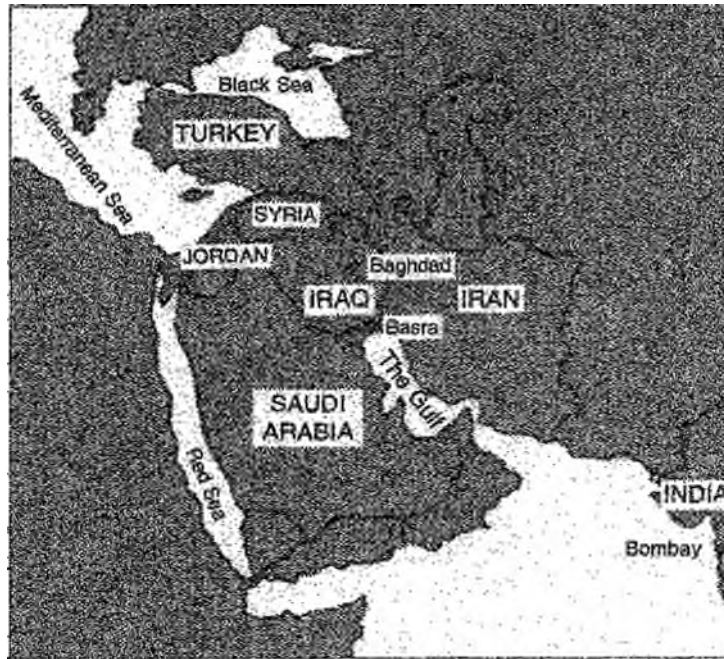
Before I uncovered the details of the experiences of Sergeant Frederick Smith of Ascott in the First World War, the campaign in Mesopotamia (now Iraq), including the Siege of Kut, one of the longest in British history, was virtually unknown to me. I then imagined that Fred Smith was probably the only man from this area who was part of this obscure theatre of war. But the more I read about this totally disastrous, badly planned and well concealed episode of the Great War, I discovered that an appreciable number of men from around the Wychwood area were involved. These were men of the regular army, members of the 1st Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry who were serving in the Indian Army before the war, and were sent directly from India, initially to help secure the oilfields of Mesopotamia during the latter part of 1914.

In the beginning good progress was made up the Tigris and Euphrates rivers despite lack of transport, poor planning, insufficient medical facilities and extremely difficult weather conditions. But the first casualty from the Wychwoods was Lance Corporal Charles William Wiggins from Milton who died on the 21st June 1915 from a fever contracted on board ship in the Persian Gulf whilst sailing to join the 1st Battalion. He was buried at sea and his name is on the Basra Memorial. A photograph of Charles Wiggins appears in The Second Wychwoods Album. Three brothers of that family died in the First World War. The Wiggins family of at least seven children lived in the last cottage on the right as you leave Milton for Upper Milton.

As the expeditionary force fought their way north up the Tigris and Euphrates valleys towards Baghdad, a Churchill man Gunner Frank Webb of the 10th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery became one of the many victims of the rampant local diseases. He died on 17th July 1915 and was buried in Amara War Cemetery. The battle of Ctesiphon took place in November as the force approached Baghdad. Although a victory beckoned for Townshend's men it was nevertheless a bridge too far. Massed Turkish troops lay entrenched before them and difficulty with supplies enforced a retreat. Francis Constantine William Wynter, Captain in the 1st Battalion Oxford and Bucks died during that battle on 22 November 1915, age 27.

His name is inscribed on the Basra Memorial. A quartet of memorials in Ramsden Church records the deaths of his brother in France earlier in 1915, himself in November, his father in 1914 and his mother, a member of the Dillon family of Ditchley Park, in 1917.

Following the retreat from Ctesiphon to Kut in December, Lindo Oronto Parsloe, also of Milton, was killed in action within the town and his body lies in the cemetery there. The Turkish army staged a major attack on Kut on 24 December during which the Oxford and Bucks were highly praised for their part in the action. As Lindo died on 27 December, it may well be that he was fatally wounded in this action. Another family of at least seven children, the Parsloes lived in the present Mill Cottage which adjoined the former mill where Milton service station now stands.



Map of the Middle East showing Iraq, formerly Mesopotamia

On 6th April 1916 eighteen-year-old Christopher Handel Dyke, a private in the Oxford and Bucks whose parents Edward and Ange lived in Playing Close, Charlbury, became another local casualty. His death occurred during the siege when he may have been a victim of shelling. There is no record of a burial and his name appears on the Basra memorial. More likely however, he may have been a member of the newly raised 1st Battalion Oxford and Bucks, who whilst attempting to relieve the troops in Kut suffered a severe defeat in Sannaiyat on 6th April when 13 officers and 220 other ranks were lost.

Major General Townshend surrendered to the Turkish commanders on 29th April 1916. Shortly after the surviving starving, ill and unfit men of the 17th Division, the Oxford and Bucks and three Indian battalions, were separated from their officers, and together with most of the remaining force were marched out of Kut on their long journey into captivity. By 2nd May another Milton man, George Thomas Bridges has succumbed to the dreadful conditions. He has no known grave but his name like that of Charles Wiggins appears on the Basra Memorial.

In the little book kept by Company Sergeant Major Love during his captivity in Mesopotamia and now held at the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry Museum at Headington, some of the men of the Battalion Received their last mention. And it was there that I found the final record of Fred Smith of Ascott; "Was left at Mamoura on the march to Airan suffering from dysentery have not been seen or heard of since. 26th June 1916." He died on 15th August 1916.

On 3rd July 1916 S. Joynes of Chipping Norton was left at Bagtchi suffering from cholera. His name appears on the Chipping Norton war memorial.

On 25th July, Edward John Faulkner of Taynton, age 34, son of William and Harriet, whose name is inscribed on the memorial in Taynton Church, also died at Bagtchi. Like Fred Smith, he was suffering from dysentery.

Another Chipping Norton man, also suffering from dysentery and lost on the march was Lance Corporal J.H. Keen, age 28, the son of Joseph Keen from Chapel House. He died on Sunday 6th

August 1916 and his name appears on the Chipping Norton War Memorial. Together with Fred Smith and Edward Faulkner, his body was ultimately buried in the Baghdad North Gate Cemetery.

As well as these local men who all drew their last breath in Mesopotamia, and Charles Wiggins, buried at Sea, one other man on the Shipton war memorial, 2nd Lieutenant Cedric Donovan Upstone was also a victim of the campaign. A member of the 1st/4th Devonshires who served as part of the Tigris Force in 1916, he died in India and his name is recorded on the Kirkee Memorial near Poona, not far from Bombay where the Expeditionary Force D embarked. His date of death was 11th July 1916 so it would appear that he either died of illness before actually embarking for Mesopotamia, or on reaching there may have been wounded and sent back to India as a casualty.

In August 1916 General Sir Frederick Maude arrived in Mesopotamia. With fresh manpower and ample supplies, he advanced up the Tigris in

December, Kut surrendered on 25th February 1917, and on 11th March 1917 allied troops finally entered Baghdad. Gerald Watts of Milton may be yet another local man whose remains lie in this foreign land. His family had recently left Poplar Farm in the centre of the village and Private M.G. Warts of the 5th Battalion Wiltshire Regiment who was buried at Amara war cemetery on 1st March 1917 is possibly another Oxfordshire man who never returned home.

It seems likely that the family and friends of these soldiers who were casualties of the campaign never really knew about the dreadful conditions and experiences which their sons, husbands and brothers endured. Only over time has the full story emerged. Of the 300 Oxford and Bucks who went into captivity only 90 survived to return home. I should be interested to hear if there were any known local survivors of this horrendous episode.

Today strong recommendations are issued not to visit wealth war graves cemeteries in Iraq and certainly in the past vandalism has occurred at their sites. It is ironic that a neglected war there in the early part of the twentieth century took the lives of several of our local men and condemned their bodies to remain on that foreign field. How little would they or their fellow soldiers have imagined that in less than ninety years, their last resting place would become such a prominent flashpoint for yet another war.

With grateful thanks to John Rawlins for his assistance.

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- 'His Name be Not Forgotten', Wychwoods History No 17.