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## The First World War Mesopotamian Campaigns: Military Lessons on Iraqi Ground Warfare

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume IV, Issue 6 (June 2005)

by [LCDR Youssef Aboul-Enein, MSC. USN](#)

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### Introduction

In no other time has it been important to re-examine the lessons from the 1914 British and Indian campaigns in Mesopotamia. In Ottoman, Arabic and British sources there are important lessons to be shared with coalition military planners as they work towards stabilizing Iraq despite an increase in insurgency activity. This essay will explore various sources to highlight what can be learned from a campaign in Iraq that was conducted eighty years ago. Much like studying Viet-cong, North Korean and Soviet tactics in the cold war, today's staff colleges must look at obscure campaigns in the Middle East, and Africa as we face the problems of religious radicalism, tribal and clan warfare as well as rising nationalism in places like Afghanistan, Somalia and Basilan Island in the Philippines.

### Iraqi General Nadeem Writes the Best Arabic Version of the 1914 Iraq War

The late Iraqi General Shukry Mahmood Nadeem wrote the most comprehensive study of the 1914-1918 Mesopotamian campaigns in the Arabic language. It is considered an important modern military analytical work in Arabic. Originally published in 1954, *Harb Al-Iraq 1914-1918 Dirasa Ilmiyah* underwent printings in 1956, 1962 and 1963.<sup>[1]</sup> What distinguishes the work from other Arabic military works is the detailed focus on tactics. Nadeem's book forms an important part of Iraq's military academy studies during the monarchy of King Faisal II, and then General Abdel-Karim Kassem and finally strongman Colonel Abdel-Rahman Arif. The quality of such rational military studies saw a steep decline under the Baathist regime from 1968 to 2003. So much so, that for an Arab to learn about the Iran-Iraq War in Arabic one has consult Egyptian books, chiefly the study done by former Egyptian Defense Minister Field Marshal Abdel-Halim Abu Gazallah. The rediscovery of this book and highlighting it today is vital in rediscovering a thoughtful military tradition lost to decades of Iraqi officers not being empowered to think rationally and freely about the defense of Iraq and instead focus on the appeasement of Saddam Hussein and his inner-circle.

### Reconstructing the New Iraqi Military

Coalition forces are contending with the daunting task of reconstructing Iraq's security forces, this includes a rediscovery of lost Iraqi military books that are positive and offer true historical and tactical analysis of military campaigns. Not conspiratorial and military articles that postulate absurd and bigoted notions about an adversary that was found in Iraqi military publications of the Saddam period. Nadeem's book is a hidden military treasure that demonstrates to both Iraqi and American leaders the quality of Arab military thought in the pre-Baath period.

Nadeem brings together Arabic, British and Ottoman sources. The book immediately demonstrates the use of tribal alliances by both Ottoman and British forces to gain a military advantage. Another lesson learned is the use of river gunboats and small watercraft not only for the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers but numerous tributaries and estuaries to conduct assaults from these rivers and for logistical re-supply of ground forces. Nadeem also discusses the British use of air reconnaissance one of the earliest examples of the application of airpower in an information-gathering role.

Nadeem's preface mentions how honored he is to have a fourth edition published and how this work forms an important part of examining Iraqi officers who apply to the higher staff college in Baghdad.<sup>[2]</sup> The work is also worthy of analysis as former Saddam loyalists no doubt have come across Nadeem's book as a means of studying how to frustrate British and coalition forces in varied regions of Iraq. One must assume, that since it underwent its fourth printing in nine years (1956 to 1963), this is a widely distributed book among Iraqi officers. The copy obtained for this review was through Georgetown University and is the fourth edition.

## Strategic Assessment

In 1914, the Ottoman Empire existed only in name and a group of army officers created the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP), which was the real power behind Sultan Mohammed V. Military leaders like Enver Pasha, and Talat Pasha were all products of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II (1876 to 1909) pro-German policies. This culminated in a secret pact signed between the Germans and Ottomans in August 1914. Iraq, at the time was divided into three *sanjaks* (Ottoman governing regions) of Mosul, Basra, and Baghdad. Nadeem opens with a strategic assessment and highlights the reorganization of British Indian auxiliary forces in 1904, which left only one Indian Expeditionary Division, dedicated to the protection of Persian Gulf interests. The Sixth "Indian" Expeditionary Division was composed of the 16th, 17th and 18th Infantry Regiments. A decade later this force would be called upon to defend several key strategic interests:<sup>[3]</sup>

- The 140-mile Anglo-Persian oil pipeline.
- The oil refineries at Abadan.

The central debate of the Mesopotamian campaigns was whether to secure Arabstan and the British oil interests only or press forward and drive out Ottoman forces from Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) in a bold strategy called forward defense.

## Landings in Basra

British and Indian Expeditionary Force left Bombay (7,000 troops) in mid-October and has been positioned in anticipation of the formal Ottoman declaration of war to secure Abadan. Between mid-October and the landing of 600 British/Indian troops on Fao Peninsula on November 7th, the Commanding General Sir Arthur Bennett used the time to practice to exercise his force in amphibious landings and combined operations with the Royal Navy.

The Ottomans sent two regiments to intercept the British landing force, but it was too little too late. One of the little known secrets of the success of the British landings is the alliance they had

bought of the Sheikh of Muhamara who provided valuable intelligence on Ottoman movements. Both Shiekh of Muhamara and the Emir of Kuwait both received protection and funds from the British, and their territory bordered one another. This cultivation of tribal fiefdoms enabled British units to be sent prior to the landing to cut the Fao to Basra telegraph wire. The constant information from these tribes is highlighted in General Nadeem's book and allowed the British 16th and 18th divisions supported by a flotilla of gunboats to envelope four Turkish regiments of 1,500 troops and 2,000 volunteers.[4]

In March 2003, the attack on Basra and the Shatt Al-Arab waterway was a combined Anglo-American operation. It consisted of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit assigned to the British 3rd Commando Brigade. The MEU combined infantry strike capability from the air and sea, secured the Fao Peninsula and seized oil facilities offshore. The focus was securing oil installations to prevent the Baathists from destroying them. Royal Navy frigates HMS *Marlborough* and *Chatham* as well as a Royal Australian Navy frigate that laid down suppressive gunfire on Iraqi defenses supported the operation. After securing wellheads, the 3rd Commando Brigade and 15th MEU advanced toward Umm Qasr (Iraq's only port) and Zubayr (a naval base) within 96 hours.[5] As in 1914 advanced securing of Fao was necessary to begin an assault on Iraq from the Shat-Al-Arab waterway northward.

### **Occupation of Basra (November 27, 1914): A Lesson in Civil Affairs**

Ottomans unused to combined naval and infantry tactics panicked and ordered the evacuation of the city. Marsh Arabs from the southern estuaries arrived before the British and began to loot the city. Finally, as the Ottoman forces withdrew, the Turkish commanders scuttled four ships vessels tied together to form a barrier against approaching British gunboats, this action along with mining should've been done as the English Expeditionary Force amassed in Bahrain. The current swung one vessel aside and allowed the British flotilla to enter the Shat Al-Arab one at a time.[6]

What is extraordinary is the way in which British commanders brought in members of the revenue service to sort through documents in Basra. The occupying force made distinctions between Turkish combatants, Ottoman administrators and Arab peoples of Iraq. The Turkish subjects were treated as combatants and the Arabs cultivated as allies if possible. This led to discussions among British officers as how to provide Arabs who were technically "enemy aliens," benefits. Mesopotamian Arabs were issued papers describing the bearer as subjects of the Occupied Ottoman Territory of Mesopotamia. This achieved two things a semblance of order and administration for the Shiite Arab majority and identification of the population.[7]

The British complained of too few British and Indian military police units and they could not prevent piracy and banditry from the Fao to Basra and along the Shat Al-Arab estuary. Sir Percy Cox identified a Mr. Gregson, a retired Colonial Indian Police expert who had a propensity for languages and did his duty patrolling what is today's Pakistani Northwestern Frontier. Gregson and his staff arrived a week into the occupation of Basra. Here is what is known about what he did, Gregson[8]:

- Established police posts wherever the Turkish had them;
- Brought in Indian Muslims from the Punjab, Somalia and Aden to police Basra;
- Declared martial-law and sent notice to the population that trial by courts-martial would be undertaken in particular for murderers.

The British police force noted the initial caution of the Arab inhabitants of Basra unsure if the Ottomans would return and exact vengeance. They had been subject to the oppressive rule of Fakhri Pasha who hanged Arabs for the slightest offense, and had prisoners sewn into sacks and dropped into the Shat Al-Arab estuary.

Another aspect that was brought to the attention of British military planners in Basra was dealing with the economy. Indian silver rupees and banknotes were brought in and an exchange rate established. Other highlights included cultivating relations and co-opting Shia and Sunni tribes, visits from British officials to tribal leaders that bolstered the Sheikh's standing among his people. The cultivation of tribes were a risk and gamble with examples such as Sayyid Talib Pasha, an influential Sunni who controlled the Muntafiq Shiite Tribal Confederation who coveted autonomous rule over Basra to the exclusion of other tribal unions. This was unacceptable and Sayyid Talib was marginalized and switched over to the Ottomans and Germans.[\[9\]](#)

However with enough money and a demonstration of military might, Sheikh Ibrahim of Zubair and the Sheikh of Hartha cooperated with the British. To the uninitiated these tribal unions could be dismissed but the British having experienced the Indian Sepoy Rebellion and using their long experience in co-opting the Sheikhs along the Persian Gulf coast understood these alliances meant access to land between Basra and Qurna on the way to Baghdad unmolested, and conserving British firepower for the Ottomans. April 13, 1915 is an example of neglecting tribal co-optation a Turkish force augmented with tribes was near Al-Shuayba, and entered into battle with the British who had secured Basra. After the Ottomans were beaten, they retreated through Lake Hammar (Muntafiq territory) where the Muntafiq tribe fell on them, massacring the Turks.[\[10\]](#)

In 2002, General Tommy Franks rightly assessed that British forces had the experience operating in Southern Iraq and could secure the Shat Al-Arab and Basra while attempting to pacify the populace.[\[11\]](#)

## Ottoman Errors

Nadeem analyzes each battle in terms of lessons learned and what in hindsight the Ottomans should've done. In the capture of Basra, Umm Qasr and Fao in Southern Iraq, he says the Ottoman did not:[\[12\]](#)

- Reinforce Fao, equipping it with shore batteries to deny a British amphibious landing;
- Develop secondary defensive lines to contain British forces in Fao;
- Deny the Shat-Al-Arab waterway to British gunboats by mining and scuttling ships;
- Harass of Abadan should've occurred once British Task Force D entered the Persian Gulf and marshaled in Bahrain.

## The Impact of Declaration of Jihad by Sultan Mohammed V

Jihad declarations in World War I, differ from today's daily declarations of Jihad from those untrained in Islamic law, thought and precedent. Al-Qaeda's Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri lack the religious authority to declare a jihad and many clerics today issue fatwas that contradict and astound Muslims. Today there is no central authority to rule between the competing fatwas. In World War I, Ottoman ruler Sultan Mohammed V, used his title Caliph (Khalifa) as the singular authority to rule on religious issues. He wasted no time in declaring a Jihad against Britain, France and Russia. It was hoped a Muslim mass uprising would ensue among the subjects of the Russian caucuses, French North Africa and British India. This did not materialize, but the Jihad declaration had an impact in tribal cooptation in Iraq.

The Iraqi tribes who responded to the Ottoman fatwa of jihad included the Bani Turuf, the Bani Saaleh, the Bani Tameem, the Bani Skain, the Fallahiyah Ch'aab (Nation), the Mirs of Hindayan and the Ghabdan of the Bani Lam. The Ghabdan of the Bani Lam offered several gold guineas for every British or Indian head brought to the chieftain.[\[13\]](#)

## Debate onto Baghdad or Secure Arabstan?

The ease in which the initial attack of Southern Iraq and securing Abadan occurred led to a debate between London and Delhi (the British Indian Administration) over whether to seize the initiative and march on Baghdad. Sir Percy Cox argued for pressing onward to Baghdad and the field commander in Mesopotamia, General Arthur Barrett argued that it was 400 miles to Baghdad and even if he had defeated the Ottomans, he had too few troops to secure the city. Securing Arabstan and creating defense in depth of British oil interests in Persia would be the initial focus. Al-Qurna was to be the next objective to add the rich agricultural region to sustain refineries and industry in Abadan. Taking Qurna made tactical sense, it was where the 38th Ottoman Division retreated, and it was an ideal logistical base since it lay at the intersection of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers.[14] Qurna also added a rich agricultural region to sustain the refineries in Abadan, Persia. What is militarily significant about Qurna, is the Ottomans when they chose to defend an area were stubborn and tenacious, but when something was tactically unexpected during this defense, the Ottoman forces in Iraq surrendered or fled. Initially Barrett's two infantry battalions were inadequate to take the village but reinforcements were needed from Basra. The British succeeded in taking the village with 2,100 troops coming from the rear, while British gunboats diverted and kept the Ottomans occupied to the North at the Tigris-Euphrates river confluences, which Subhi Bey, the Ottoman commander, had expected a direct assault. The Turks seeing they had been outflanked and surrendered without a fight in December 1914.

## **The Ignored Tactical Mind of Colonel Suleiman Al-Askary**

The Ottoman General Staff frustrated by the abysmal performance of the Ottoman 38th Division in Southern Iraq assigned an Arab Colonel Suleiman Al-Askary to take charge. The Ottomans however could never fully allow him free control so his impact was not felt. Nadeem discusses some of his initial ideas before Ottoman General in Mesopotamia Bakr Bey, overruled him.

Colonel Al-Askary had little combat experience, but was aggressive and popular with irregular tribal warriors. Askary proposed organizing the 35th (arriving from the Levant) and 38th Divisions, volunteers and irregulars into two diversionary forces and one main attack force to capture Basra. The Karun River Attack Force would advance along the Karun River south to threaten Al-Muhammara forcing the British to divert forces to defend the tribe they found to be so cooperative. The Dajlah River Attack Force would travel southward along the Dajlah River to attack Al-Qurna. These were diversions that masked the 35th Division plus assault traveling south along the Euphrates to attack Basra from Al-Zubair. General Bakr wanted to harass Arabstan and threaten Ahvaz until the arrival of the 35th Ottoman Division and then wanted to concentrate his effort on creating chaos on British oil installations.

Nadeem spends several pages discussing the military tactical innovations and what might have been had Askari been given full command.[15] Askary understood the Euphrates and wanted to engage British forces in areas where the gunboats would have less maneuverability. He immediately understood the need to negate the British advantage of joint river and ground operations. Askary assessed that the Euphrates between Nasiriya and Shuayba represented a chance to contain British gunboats due to the shallowness of the part of the river.

## **1915: Ottomans Mount an Assault on Arabstan (Persia)**

Ottomans, on the January 26, 1915, used a cavalry regiment, an infantry battalion and tribal irregulars of the Bani Lam and Bani Tarf to harass the Persian town of Ahvaz from the Iraqi town of Amara. The British sent the 12th regiment to quell this harassment and understood the need to secure Ahvaz, which offered a direct overland route to Abadan. Barrett pursued this Ottoman harassment force and engaged them unconventionally, which was the Ottoman/Arab strength. In the marshes and banks of the River Karkha, Barrett's force took a beating and suffered its first serious loss.

After their successes in Basra and Qurna, the British drove the Ottoman force 13 kilometers north of the Tigris to Ruta, a failed Anglo-Indian raid on Ruta of 3,000 troops failed to dislodge the Ottomans.[16] The British then focused on pouring more troops into Ahvaz, which included the 7th Rajputs and 1,000 tribesmen from the Sheikh of Muhamara who had old scores to settle with the tribes attached to the Ottoman harassing force.[17] Persian Bakhtairi tribes were disunited and a significant number had investments in Anglo-Persian and were not inclined to see the British fail. The British created an 11,000-man force the South Persian Rifles to keep order along the Iraqi-Persian border in 1916.

## The Battle of Al-Shuaybah

Although the Ottomans were unsuccessful, this particular battle saw the Turks going on the offensive in a conventional manner. Till this point the Ottomans in Iraq were fighting defensively and only offensively in guerilla style tactics along the Iraqi-Iranian border. Drawing under two dozen regiments from Nasiriyah, Rutah and Huwayzah supported by 30,000 tribal irregulars and forty cannon, the Ottomans engaged in stunted attacks on the British garrison at Al-Shuaybah on the night of April 11, 1915. They combined artillery and infantry and were able to get within 1,000 yards of the garrison. Seeing the size of the Ottoman force, the British sent two battalions from the 30th Division to reinforce Shuaybah. This force arrived on April 13th, and began securing the elevations occupied by the Ottomans and used to pour artillery fire on Shuaybah. Suleiman Al-Askary ordered a withdrawal that day, but paused one day to bury the dead. The British mounted an overland cavalry assault supported by a regiment of infantry, but when the orderly withdrawal Askary had planned turned into a rout that cost 6,000 Ottoman dead and 1,200 British dead, Askary committed suicide over his military debacle.[18]

A second Ottoman harassment force crossed the Tigris and was sent in early April 1915 to threaten pro-British Persia and particularly the refinery at Ahvaz. A third force of 24,000 irregulars left Nasiriyah south to harass British forces in Basra. These were all diversionary attacks for the Ottoman main effort to recapture Shuaybah. The British had been reinforced in Basra with 30,000 men but were short of supplies and in particular fresh water. The Ottomans also coordinated simultaneous artillery attacks on Shuaybah and Qurna.[19] What saved Shuaybah was the inability of the Ottomans to coordinate artillery and infantry assaults along with the British sending two brigades at the right time to reinforce Al-Shuaybah.

## Lessons from Shuaybah

Ottomans could have learned much from this battle, they had a problem of concentrating their forces, cooperation among units, and conducting advanced reconnaissance. Other problems included controlling forces with a mix of irregular volunteers and regular Ottoman troops and finally finding counter-measures to superior British firepower. The British although the victors never understood they could not sustain the same casualties as the Ottomans and needed to appreciate that the assault did require reinforcements from other units policing southern Iraq. Instead of taking stock of the casualties, the British declared victory and decided to press onward to Nasiriyah.

## Riverine Warfare

General Barrett would be replaced by General (Sir) John Nixon. Realizing the importance of the network of waterways in Iraq, he ordered every regiment to have personnel trained in using local river boats known as Al-Bilaam (plural). These indigenous craft resemble large canoes that carry half a ton. His efforts led to each regiment possessing or contracting seventy local Arab river boats. The combination of watercraft and engineers would be vital in the battles to come, beginning with the battle of Nasiriyah. Iraq prior to building of a network of dams in the twentieth century had annual floods that left horse and vehicular traffic useless as it waded through knee-

deep mud. In addition, floods would break up units as they sought high ground. As the Ottomans struggled with repositioning forces due to floods, Nixon had organized 372 Bahl-maan (singular) Boats for his 17th Division under General Townsend. The first test came on June 3, 1915, when the 17th Division assaulted from the river supported by aerial reconnaissance and gunboats. The 1,000-man Ottoman force in Amara surrendered with no resistance and Ottomans sent a battalion to reinforce Amara but was broken up by British river gunboats.

Nixon now set his sights on Nasiriyah which would deny Ottoman forces a vital road and river link to Kut and would allow for the subjugation of a troublesome tribe led by Ajami (Pasha) Saadoun. On June 16th, Nixon gave orders to Gen Gorrings's 12th Division who dispatched the 30th Regiment, two companies of artillery and a riverine fleet to pave the way for the assault on Nassiriyah. This involved spending June clearing the Euphrates River access between Hamar, Kabaish and Souq Al-Sheyeakh, some of which had solid earthworks constructed by the Ottomans. Gorrings's force began the battle for Nasiriyah on night of July 7-8.

Gorrings's force found the initial going difficult not just because the 35th Ottoman Division had set up two defensive rings using an infantry regiment, Cavalry Company, and eight cannon around the city. The Ottomans had scuttled ships to bar British craft from approaching Nasiriyah, but also the heat (115 degrees Fahrenheit) and disease sapped the strength of the British attackers.<sup>[20]</sup> Another nuisance was the Bidoos Tribe that owed allegiance to neither the Ottomans nor British and ambushed both for plunder. Both sides began with inadequate forces, as Gorrings brought the bulk of the 12th Infantry Division and the Ottomans sent a regiment based in Kut. Gorrings attacked again in the darkness of July 13-14, but was again unsuccessful. It was not until the 18th Division was sent and an assault on both banks of the Euphrates commenced that the first and second lines of defense fell on July 25th. Gorrings was able to capture Nasiriyah using the tactic of waterborne river infantry assaults that completely surprised the Ottomans. The butcher's bill was 2,000 Ottoman and 400 British/Indian troops. The British occupying Nasiriyah left only Kut as the only remaining Ottoman-held urban center that could threaten Ahvaz, Amara and Nasiriyah. Once Kut was taken the British oil interests along the Persian and Iraqi border would be secure. Commander-in-Chief General Nixon tasted victory now in Amara and Nasiriyah, ignoring the high casualties and more importantly not allowing the tenuous state of his logistical trail dissuade him for pressing onward to Baghdad. This high rate of success of British forces followed by high casualties and overstretched logistical line would continue as they captured Kut Al Amara in September 1915, British Gods of War would not be so favorable at the Battle of Ctesiphon.

## Battle of Ctesiphon

General Townsend, commanding the 6th Poona Division, drew up a force of 11,000 troops of the 16th, 17th, and 18th Divisions and a portion of the 30th Division reinforced by a cavalry regiment and gunboat fleet. Kut was defended by 7,000 Ottomans and thirty-one artillery pieces. The Battle of Kut was doomed from the start, as the British planned the attack with hardly adequate logistical transport. Heat degraded British units by fifty percent in some units. The British should've known heat was a factor in the Battles of Nasiriya and Amara. Floods impacted Turkish defenses of Kut causing Turkish units to be separated as they concentrated around islands. The mud around Atabah and Sawabah Marshes around Kut made maneuver difficult. A deceiving factor was the British success at Qurna which the British thought was due to Ottomans cowardice but was also due to the Shat-Al-Arab waterway beginning to rise and drive Ottoman forces out. The Turks understood that the floods reached a height of three feet and made carting artillery and supplies difficult if they remained at Qurna.

General Townsend argued with his Commander in Chief General Nixon against further extending his supply line. Townsend wanted the lifeline to his division at Basra consolidated and secured, extra transport and trench warfare equipment before proceeding. Nixon overruled his field commander and ordered him to press forward based on the eagerness of the British Indian Home Government.<sup>[21]</sup> At Ctesiphon, Ottoman Commander in Chief Nouredine constructed two lines

of deep earthen works that straddled the Tigris River and placed 18,000 Ottoman regulars. Townsend with 11,000 troops attacked using his tested method of a river assault, beginning on November 22, 1915 with a gunboat bombardment along with night infantry assault. British infantry got lost in the night march and the Ottomans learning from previous battles had mined the Tigris and placed artillery to keep the British monitors and gunboats at bay. By the next day Townsend had suffered a casualty rate of forty percent (4,500) and the Ottomans (9,600). The advantage the Ottomans had was their logistical base was shorter only twenty-five kilometers to Baghdad where reserves could be called to the defense of Ctesiphon.<sup>[22]</sup> Nouredine unsure of British infantry numbers and thinking that reserves were on the way as well as suffering over fifty percent casualties ordered a retreat. The Ottoman Commander reversed his order when intelligence showed that Townsend and his 6th Poona Division were in dire straits and elements of the 30,000 Ottoman troop reinforcement from the Levant began to arrive. Townsend after conducting aerial reconnaissance, ordered the first British retreat of the Iraqi campaign falling back to Kut. The combined British and Indian forces fought a rear guard action the entire way back to Kut, where Townsend reinforced the city and awaited a Turkish onslaught. The British had lost 5,000 troops, the gunboats and Townsend informed Nixon of his need for reinforcement from Basra.<sup>[23]</sup>

## World War I Style Psychological Operations

In Ronald Millar's 1970 book, *The Death of an Army: The Siege of Kut 1915-1916*, he discusses how the Ottomans and Germans mastered the art of agitation. Leaflets smuggled in identified Ctesiphon as a place of Muslim significance, being the burial sight of Prophet Muhammad's best-loved companion Salman Pak. The propaganda attempted to demoralize Muslim Indian troops who were part of the expedition and it indeed it was successful in causing a private in General Townsend's 20th Punjabis to shoot a fellow sentry and an NCO.<sup>[24]</sup> This kind of agitation was also seen along the Iraqi-Persian border and was successful in turning the majority of Iraq's tribes to serve alongside the Ottomans. Another successful effort of the Ottomans was the effective use of spreading rumors among the tribes that increased the fog of war. Such as a rumor that 4,000 Ottomans and two guns arrived at the left bank of the Tigris River below Kut or that Ctesiphon had been retaken.

## The Siege at Kut

Much like Gettysburg is the turning point of the Civil War, in the Mesopotamian Campaign, Kut represented a turning point in the virtual British combat successes and the Ottoman struggle for the defense of Iraq. British intelligence indicated that Iraq would be reinforced by two Ottoman divisions, the 51st and 52nd infantry, this information was not shared by Townsend. This Ottoman reinforcement was in response to Ottoman field commander Nouredine Bey's cable to the Ottoman General Staff on July 25th. In it Nouredine argued that he could not contain rebellions in Karballah and Najaf, the two Shiite holy cities and defend Iraq against British assaults with one army corps. He proposed concentrating Ottoman offensive efforts along the Euphrates River valley using the 35th, and 38th divisions and use the 45th division to defend Baghdad. Nouredine intended to use irregulars to harass British forces Al-Samawa and conduct what they do best, guerrilla style tactics. The Ottoman General Staff would find forces in the Levant to send to Nouredine. These forces would be sent at a critical point leading to General Townsend's withdrawal to Kut.

In December 1915, General Nouredine and his German advisor General Baron Von Der Goltz undertook three failed attempts to penetrate British defenses at Kut. Nouredine then decided to seal off Kut from any re-supply, successfully parrying British relief efforts on January 6th, 13th, and 21st as well as March 8th and April 5th, 1916 to break the siege. Nouredine had concentrated over 22,500 troops and seventy-two guns to face any British reinforcement from the south. He could also rely on over 30,000 regular Ottoman troops in Baghdad to reinforce him.

Townsend force having been ravaged by disease and basic starvation negotiated an unconditional surrender with General Khalil Pasha, the Ottoman Military Governor of Baghdad, surrendering 8,000 British and Indian troops, in addition 23,000 British and Indian lives were lost both in Kut and in attempting to break the siege. Who were treated with cruelty by the Ottomans and many dying during their captivity until the armistice of 1918. General Townsend spent the remainder of the war as an honored guest of the Ottomans. Gallipoli is often remembered as the most crushing defeat of British arms in World War I, the Siege of Kut is arguably the second most significant defeat of the British Army in this conflict in many ways the surrender echoed the defeat at Yorktown.

## 1917: The Fall of Baghdad and British Tactical Recovery

With the surrender of Kut in 1915, it was not until 1917 that the British resumed offensive operations. General (Sir) Frederick Maude replaced General Nixon. Where Nixon fought methodical campaigns using river and infantry forces, Maude's tactics are more reflective of modern small operations warfare scene today. During the lull in fighting that lasted over a year the British concentrated on developing their base at Basra connecting it to Nasiriya by rail and constructing warehouses, port facilities, hospitals and camps. The British also replaced and expanded their fleet of river steamers. Maude organized his 48,000 troops into I Indian Corps under Lt. Gen. Cobbe and the III Indian Corps under Lt Gen Marshall.[\[25\]](#)

In March 1917, reinforced and learning the lessons of re-supply the British retook Kut and beginning in October 1917, Maude concentrated on mop up operations isolating garrisons and irregular units that fed that drained the British main efforts to capture Kut and Baghdad. He secured Daur with 4,200 Ottoman troops and loyalists, Tikrit with 1,360 (Saddam's Provincial Hometown Capital), Al-Auja with 1,100 (Saddam's birthplace) and Fathah with 5,100. Leaving one of those villages or hamlets meant harassment and a base for Ottomans and anti-British tribes to regroup.[\[26\]](#) Maude's attack in Kut saw Marshall's III Indian Corps west of Kut, eliminating Turkish bridgeheads through intense hand-to-hand fighting, Cobbe's I Indian Corps attacked from the east cutting through six lines of trenches. Outflanked Ottoman General Nouredine retreated to Baghdad.

At Baghdad, Khalil Pasha was in command and was not a field commander like Nouredine. His focus was internal repression and after numerous attempts British forces crossed the Diyala River and caught Khalil unprepared for a defense of Baghdad. The Ottomans simply did not prepare for a British onslaught soon after the capture of Kut, they expected that a pause would ensue for General Maude to reinforce Kut and then push onward. The interesting part is the citizens of Baghdad generally welcomed British administration, financial liberalism and had heard from relations in Nasiriya and Amara of civil order and leniency the British had brought to these towns. However, fighting did break out between Shiite and Sunni factions in the city.[\[27\]](#)

Maude noted that the 2,000 demobilized Persians who retreated as part of the Ottoman 13th Army that was defeated at Hamdan in Iraq would go back to Persia to foment anti-British incitement and organize an underground anti-British resistance. Although on a small scale, this tactic of demobilized elements regrouping in an underground adversarial organization would be replayed in 2003-2004 with the former Republican Guard and Fedayeen Saddam that melted in the face of coalition forces and regrouped within the Iraqi insurgency. The November 1917 attack on Tikrit was the most interesting of the half dozen British mop up operations, the Ottomans had dug eight miles of trenches and selected the walled town of Tikrit to make a stand against the British. The Ottomans did not select Tikrit by accident the town rose eighty feet in a sheer cliff from the Tigris River and was 150 feet above river level.[\[28\]](#) The only approach was through open plains to the South. General Cobbe provided a feint direct assault using infantry and artillery supporting in a nighttime attack, while using the bulk of his 7th Division to create right and left pincers around Tikrit and the Tigris. Commander-in-Chief Maude died on November 18, 1917, not of combat but of cholera. General Marshall who assumed command continued the policy of

dealing with pockets of villages that drained the British main objective of taking Baghdad by securing Qala, Shirwan and Diyala.[29]

During the summer of 1917, the British Imperial Staff began a serious discussion of developing Iraq's railway and river system of transport. A study by Major General Freeland proposed a rail link from Basra up the Euphrates River via Nasiriyah to Baghdad. Senior British Commander General Marshall concurred with this assessment with the addition that the Tigris River had been difficult to navigate with co charts to reveal shallows, rapids and hidden shoals. Although a good idea, the British Imperial Staff did not want to commit an additional cavalry and eight infantry regiments required to secure a rail link. However by March 1918, the British had guarded what precious rail links remained and built two railway links from Basra that connected Nasiriyah and Amara as well as five links connecting Baghdad to Samara, Kut and Baquba. None connected the two major cities of Basra (site of the main British logistics base) and Baghdad (the capital).

## The Najaf Conspiracy

The Najaf Conspiracy is perhaps a little known studied element of successful psychological and urban incitement carried out by the Germans and Ottomans combined. German gold was used to foment riots and insurgencies up and down the Euphrates from Najaf leading to the killing of a British Political Officer. The task was to embolden the population to make it as uncomfortable as possible for British forces on their way to Baghdad. Another strategic problem for the British was the rise of Russian Bolshevism in 1917 and collapse of the Tsarist Romanov Dynasty. This meant 33,000 Russian troops, allied with the British, and keeping Ottoman forces occupied along the Persian frontier, Anatolia and the Crimean border would be diverted from Iraq to deal with the internal stability of Russia.[30] This use of internal Iraqi tribes and urban riots would be seen again in Operation Iraqi Freedom as U. S. Special Forces used money, weapons and expertise to encourage the Kurds to join in an assault on Saddam's forces in the North and using Iraqi exiles formed into a cadre of Free Iraq Force would assist coalition forces as translators and join in the liberation of their country. The use of micro-loans and small self-improvement projects by U.S. forces at the company level were successful initially in gaining the support of tribes.

## Lessons from 1914 and 2004 and Conclusion

There are concrete lessons to be drawn between the British Expeditionary Force that fought in World War I and coalition forces who liberated Iraq from Saddam Hussein in 2003 and whose work continues today. The similarities can be summarized as follows and both military planners had to contend with:

*Logistics:* In 2003, U.S. forces advanced so rapidly that it challenged the logistical trail to catch up with fast moving armored formations. It was U.S. Army logistics trucks that were assaulted by Fedayeen Saddam in 2003 and led to the Jessica Lynch incident. U.S. Army and Marine commanders constantly worried about ensuring their forces were amply supplied. The British in 1914 also contended with challenges to supplies as they advanced northward to Baghdad. It was the inability to secure the Basra to Baghdad river routes that led General Townsend's disaster at Kut. Simply the Ottomans could divert more resources with their main logistics base in Baghdad than the British could from Basra. Today, Operation Iraqi Freedom would not have been possible were it not for Kuwaiti cooperation in staging massive amounts of military equipment.

*Tribal Incitement, Intelligence Gathering and Tactics:* In 1914, gruesome tactics were employed by tribes incited by the Ottomans to include beheadings. The Ghabdan of the Bani Lam offered several gold guineas for every British or Indian head brought to the chief. In addition, Ottoman and German incitement in Persia was a concern of British military planners. Finally, in 1914, the tribal sheikh of Muhammara and Kuwait were pivotal to British forces landing in Iraq.

*Debate about Enough Troops:* In 2004, there continues to be a heated debate about whether or not there were adequate U.S. forces on the ground. The British over ninety years ago grappled with the same question, initially there were enough forces to secure Southern Iraq but they found that keeping order in occupied cities was a challenge that required expertise and troops. The inadequate amount of forces was shown during the disaster in Kut in 1915. After Kut, the British sent further units into Iraq.

*Civil Affairs:* The British of World War I, identified retired colonial police administrators who brought a semblance of order in Basra. They also had the foresight to include members of the revenue service and bureaucrats who could quickly organize documents scattered and left behind after a retreating army. One of the most memorable aspects of civil affairs was the introduction of the Indian Rupee and creation of market economies as a means of engaging the population in the pursuit of sustaining British forces in Iraq.

*Weather:* In 2003, U.S. forces encountered the mother of all sandstorms that limited visibility for both the opposing Iraqis and Americans. Ninety years ago it was flooding and heat that wore down both sides.

*Waging Irregular War from Hamlets:* This was a difficult lessons for the British to learn and it was not until General Marshall assumed command in 1917 (the British had been in Iraq fighting the Ottomans for three years) that a serious attempt at pacifying villages were made. With trial and error, it was finally realized that tribesmen loyal and bought by the Ottomans formed an irregular force that sapped British efforts towards Baghdad. With their initial tactic (1914-1915) of widening the security zone from the oil regions of Abadan, as British forces acquired more Iraqi territory (in particular major urban areas) they began to understand that leaving hostile tribes in villages only served to undermine British zones of security. At the time of writing this essay U.S. Marines are beginning a massive assault on Fallujah, it has always been understood that hamlets that allow insurgents to remain active only serve to undermine the Interim Iraqi Government and planned elections for January 2005.

## Conclusion

A reexamination of the Mesopotamian campaigns of World War I is a must for up-and-coming U.S. officers who are about to take command at the company level. As U.S. forces become more involved in the region, an Iran developing nuclear weapons and Syria that is undermining Iraqi stability, studying these campaigns and understanding terrain and maneuver becomes that much more important today. Such books that highlight the tactics of the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam's war against the Kurdish separatist fighters or the Yemen War of 1962 to 1967 are the kinds of conflicts that need to be dusted off and discussed in U.S. military tactical discourse.

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