

George Edward PERKINS

Gunner 778, 1st/5th Hampshire Howitzer Battery, Royal Field Artillery

George Edward PERKINS was the son of Fred Edward and Frances Mary PERKINS and was born in Newport, Isle of Wight on 14th September 1895.

Fred was a baker and confectioner and married Frances COOPER in 1895 at the Wesleyan Chapel in Pyle Street, Newport. The family lived first in St Paul's View, Barton Village and George was enrolled at Barton School on 3rd July 1902, leaving with a scholarship on 30th August 1909.

Another son, Reginald William, was born in 1907 and by 1911 the family had moved to 156 High Street, Newport where Fred was running his bakery business.

As a young man George joined the 1st/5th Hampshire Howitzer Battery, Royal Field Artillery, a part-time Territorial Forces unit based in the West Wight and at the outbreak of war in August 1914, the force was mobilised for duty.

Turkey's entry into the war on 29th October 1914 immediately prompted Britain to open a new military front in the remote Ottoman province of Mesopotamia (Present day Iraq) to protect British oil interests in the region which were supplying oil to the Royal Navy and a force marched north and inland from the port of Basra on the Persian Gulf with initial success during the last months of the year.

George and his colleagues in 1st/5th Hampshire Howitzer Battery were sent first to India leaving England in October 1914 and on 14th March 1915 sailed from India to Mesopotamia (Persian Gulf), reaching Basra on 22nd March and joining with other British and Indian forces on the march inland along the route of the River Tigris towards Baghdad.

Despite the unforgiving climate the march continued through 1915 and by 28th September the town of Kut-al-Amara was reached, just 120 miles south of Baghdad. But in November the advancing British force under the command of Major-General Charles TOWNSHEND was turned back by Turkish troops at the Battle of Ctesiphon (22nd-24th November) with more than half of the British forces killed or wounded. The survivors then endured a dangerous and exhausting retreat to Kut-al-Amara from 25th November until 3rd December without decent medical or transport facilities.

Turkish forces, commanded by Halil Pasha, followed the retreating British and laid siege to Kut. The siege lasted 147 days from 7th December 1915 before the 11,800 British and Indian troops inside the town finally surrendered on 29th April 1916.

Conditions during the siege were appalling in bitterly cold weather and with little medical treatment, many of the soldiers did not survive the winter. Several attempts were made to relieve the besieged town but were met with stubborn Turkish resistance and all ended in failure.

The letter of surrender from Major-General TOWNSHEND asked that the sick and wounded of his force be sent to India in exchange with Turkish prisoners of war but after the surrender this request was ignored by the Turkish command.

Horrific repercussions followed the surrender with British and Indian soldiers brutally treated on their march to Turkish prisoner-of-war camps in Anatolia – of the 11,800 men who left Kut-al-Amara with their captors on 6th May 1916, 4,250 died either on their way to captivity or in the camps that awaited them at the journey's end.



1st/5th Hants Howitzer Battery – Howitzers Loading on to Raft on River Tigris 1915



Members of 1st/5th Hants Howitzer Battery at Kut-al-Amara in September 1915



Map of Mesopotamia and the Central Anatolia region of Turkey 1914-1918

George gave an account of his experiences to *the Isle of Wight County Press* following his return home from captivity in December 1918.

At the end of the siege many of the British were so reduced by starvation and sickness that they could hardly walk. They were marched in their units to the side of the river from Kut and taken in boats to Samara, where they were given rations of Turkish biscuits and dates. Even here the British prisoners were dying from enteritis and other disease, due to the terrible conditions of the siege but in spite of this they were quickly started off on the long march westward in four columns, with a sick column in addition, in the charge of an Arab cavalry escort.

Prior to starting the Island Howitzers paid a last tribute to the memory of one of their brave comrades, Gunner Ernest FLUX of Marks Corner, who was one of the first prisoners to die after getting into captivity. The prisoners had to leave behind all the kit they could not march with and as they were mostly very weak it meant that they entered on this fatiguing march with very little indeed to sustain or protect them. Many poor fellows were soon in a pitiable condition, dropping behind through sheer weakness and exhaustion.

When they could not respond to the shouts of their cruel Arab guards to hurry up they were whipped, clubbed and ridden down by the horsemen, who stole their boots and other belongings when they fell and left them to the mercy of the desert. The heat was intense and the prisoners suffered severely through lack of water as well as food. They marched from waterhole to waterhole in the desert, only passing Arab villages, where there was no chance of obtaining additional sustenance for so large a body of men.

When a man fell out through disease or exhaustion there was little or no chance for him. He was slung across the back of a donkey or mule and taken to what was called an ambulance hut, made of mud and left, it is feared to die. These poor prisoners dragged their weary and painful way over the desert during May and June, until they arrived at the railhead of the Berlin-Baghdad line.

George fell out through sickness at Mosul and was placed in the hospital there for a time. He started off again with the next column which passed through. At the end of their desert march the prisoners were taken over by Germans, those in the worst condition being sent to hospital, whilst the rest were made to work extending the Baghdad railway line.

They worked under German engineers and there was a great deal of tunnelling through the mountains. Men were put to work, although they were terribly unfit and were dying like sheep from weakness and disease.

A great many of the Isle of Wight men went to a hospital at Bagtche, where the treatment was very bad and a number died. After about three months the British prisoners were transferred to prison camps at Afion-Kara Hissar and Angora. It was at the Afion camp where the "bastinado" beating on the soles of the feet with a stick or cudgel – was first seen practised on prisoners under the cruel Turkish commander.

This commander, Mazlum Bey, was later reported in official quarters by prisoners. George also went to Gedos (or Kedos) camp, where the conditions were tolerable by contrast. Kedos was primarily an officer's camp. George was an orderly or servant to the officers there and there is no doubt that this increased his chance of survival.

The prisoners here began to receive parcels from home and money through the consulate and the American Ambassador. They were most grateful for the parcels sent from the Isle of Wight through the agency of the Island Kut Prisoners of War Fund.

Some of the British medical staff were left with the prisoners but the Turks took their medicines and although handicapped in this way, the doctors did their best. The treatment received by the prisoners in the American hospitals was in striking contrast with that experienced in the Turkish institutions. The captivity continued until the Armistice in November 1918 but then the Turks turned on the Germans and the British prisoners, then practically free, were transferred to Smyrna to await shipment for home.

George embarked on an Australian hospital ship on 19th November and proceeded to Alexandria and thence returned to England landing at Dover on 16th December 1918 and arriving home on the Isle of Wight four days later.

The *Isle of Wight County Press* acknowledged that George had been able during the long captivity to send home news for publication of other Island men and his service in that direction had been much appreciated.

After recovery he went back to work with his father and subsequently married Ethel May URRY at the United Methodist Chapel, Newport in 1920. The couple had a son, Gordon Edward Henry born in 1936 and by 1939 the family was living at 9 Clarence Road in Newport with George as a baker and cake maker. George died aged 63 in 1959 and Ethel died in 1985 aged 88.

Notes:

1. The siege of Kut-al-Amara has been referred to as the worst defeat of the Allies in World War 1. The actions led to an estimated 30,000 dead or wounded and 10,000 captured on the Allied side.

2. Of the 77 rank and file of the 1st/5th Hampshire Howitzer Battery who were taken prisoners at Kut-al-Amara, records show that quite half that number died in captivity.

3. Letter of surrender from Major-General Charles TOWNSHEND to Turkish commander Halil Pasha at the end of the siege of Kut read:

"Hunger forces me to lay down our arms and I am ready to surrender to you my brave soldiers, who have done their duty as you have affirmed when you said 'your gallant troops will be our most sincere and precious guests'.

Be generous then. They have done their duty. You have seen them in battle at Ctesphion, you have seen them in retirement and you have seen them during the siege of Kut for the past five months, in which I have played the strategic role of blocking your counter-offensive and allowed time for our reinforcements to arrive.

There are some of my troops without arms and legs, some with scurvy. I do not suppose you wish to take them into captivity and in fact, the better course would be to let the wounded and sick go to India.

The Chief Imperial General Staff, London, wires me that the exchange of prisoners of war is permitted; an equal number of Turks in Egypt and India would be liberated in exchange for the same number of my combatants."

4. Major-General TOWNSHEND was taken to the island of Heybeliada on the Sea of Marmara and sat out the remainder of the war in relative luxury.
5. Mazlum Bey, the Turkish commandant of Afion-Kara-Hissar prisoner of war camp, was arrested in Constantinople on 2nd June 1919 and deported to Malta. He was among about 140 Turkish war criminals accused of participating in the Armenian Massacres and of the ill-treatment of prisoners of war in Turkey. These war criminals were held in Malta until an international court was to be established by the Allies stipulated by the Sevres Treaty.

This Treaty was never ratified and a Turkish Nationalist movement headed by Kemal ATATURK resisted the demands of the Allies. The Turkish Nationalists captured and held hostage about 40 British soldiers whom they used as a bargaining tool for the 140 Turks in Malta.

Due to the disunity of the Allies in their relations with the Nationalists, the British government decided to release all the Turkish detainees, except the 8 who were accused of the ill-treatment of the British POWs as they feared a backlash by the British public.

In the end, the British government also released the 8 without any conditions attached – and there was no major outcry by the British public. Mazlum Bey was never brought to justice, not because he was innocent but because of the political interests at play in the region at that time.

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