

The El Jib Affair

The 1/5 Battalion had already distinguished itself in the sharp action of El Mesmiyeh on November 13th. As Lt-Col Cooke-Hurle had been admitted to hospital in Cairo before the Third Battle of Gaza, Major FD Urwick was in command and 'the Regiment behaved splendidly ... and were much complimented.' For his brilliant leadership that day Frank Urwick was awarded the DSO.

The Battalion again distinguished itself at dusk on November 20th when in rain and mist it took a leading part in rushing the Turkish position at Kuryet el Enab. Another battalion involved was the 2/3 Gurkha Rifles, of the 232nd Brigade. 'To General Bulfin [Commander, XXI Corps] ... the first news of the success came when, above the rattle of musketry and the boom of the Turkish artillery, there were heard the shrill cheers of the Gurkhas and the deep-throated roar of the British troops, followed by regimental bugle calls.'

On November 21st the Somersets marched to Biddu by way of the old Roman road, 'though this was merely a track over the mountains which necessitated moving in single file ... where the track reached its highest point [we] got a splendid view of Jerusalem, about seven or eight miles away' (Urwick).

'We ought to have been much impressed at this glad sight; it certainly was magnificent but I fear the majority of us were very callous and irreverent. The truth is that we were all dead tired, foot-sore and feeling "fed up and far from home" ' (Milsom).

That bitterly cold, wet night (and the Battalion was still in its desert kit) the Battalion bivouacked just South of Biddu. 'For a long time we got no sleep, as one or the other's teeth would begin to chatter and the vibrations would keep the other awake' (Urwick).

The Attack on El Jib: Day One, November 22nd 1917 'This Useless Adventure'

For the day's operations the 1/5 Somersets were put under the command of Lt-Col A Armstrong, officer commanding the 1/4 Wiltshire Regiment. In Lt-Col Cooke-Hurle's continued absence Major Urwick still led the Somersets so it was inevitable that Brigadier Colston should give the senior officer charge of the force whose objective was the capture of El Jib and Bir Nebala. In his old age Stanley Goodland characterised Lt-Col Armstrong as "a madman who never cared two hoots about his men" but Urwick's account, though critical of his leadership, stresses Armstrong's gallantry 'which was beyond all praise ... It was a marvel that he was not hit that day, as he walked about in the firing line regardless of the attention of enemy snipers, and was always one of those men who do not know what fear is.'

Lt-Col Armstrong's plan was to attack El Jib and Bir Nebala from the North-West - that this was wholly reasonable, the next day's events were to show.

To achieve this he took his force North from their bivouac area at Biddu, himself leading the advance guard of two Companies of the Somersets. The main body consisted of the Somersets' two remaining Companies and Headquarters Company and, following them, Armstrong's own 1/4 Wilts Battalion. The country North of Biddu and West and North of Beit Izza was soon found to be exceptionally rocky and steep, while much of it was under observation from enemy gunners and riflemen.

'On the way we flushed a fine fox with a large bushy brush: a few forgot the business in hand and tried to bayonet 'the varmint' but the fox was the easy winner and got clear away' (Milsom).

As time passed the Companies scrambling up and down precipitous slopes became scattered and jumbled; control was difficult.

Instead of placing himself in a position from which he could direct the entire force under his command Lt-Col Armstrong personally led the advance guard. The Somersets' officers began to realise that he was persisting in keeping to a northerly line of advance long after he should have turned eastward.

'We were attacking the wrong objective altogether, a fact which our Intelligence Officer [2/Lt Bradford] confided in me' (Milsom). '

(I) at last caught up with Lt-Col 'X'. I pointed out to him that to reach El Jib we were moving about 80 degrees out on compass bearing. We . . . had a good view to the North. Lt-Col 'X' pointed to a village a shade East of North and said. "That is the only village I can see; it must be El Jib and I mean to attack it." The village he pointed out was Beitunye, about five miles away, and I told him so, but he would not believe me. We then continued to move northwards.' (Urwick).

Now Lt-Col Armstrong ordered the two remaining Somerset Companies to join the advance guard. 'I have never in war been in such a funny position as I was that day. Lt-Col 'X' after commanding two of my Companies all the morning had now taken the remaining two, with the intention of leading my Battalion himself in the attack, instead of issuing orders to me and acting as if he was the Commander of the entire force. Not being in the best of humours, or knowing quite where my duty lay and feeling that lives were being uselessly thrown away,

I kept my headquarters and Lewis guns ... I was much depressed during the afternoon by the number of our casualties in this useless adventure.' (Urwick).

On the hill top from which Lt-Col Armstrong planned to lead the next stage of his operation

Milsom reports: 'Orders and counter-orders flew about. But at last and much to my relief I located Captains Major and Banes Walker; in order to

reach them I had to cross a bullet-swept piece of ground and half way over I tripped and fell headlong. My efforts to scramble into safety caused considerable amusement to Banes Walker but not to me, as the beggars were pumping lead at me. But Banes was the same in action as he was in mess, seeing humour in everything and most delightfully casual. A few minutes later he himself was shot dead, though I never knew it until the evening.' (Milsom)

'[Banes Walker] was one of my best friends, and had proved himself a good and fearless soldier and was also an excellent horseman, and a sportsman in every way.' (Urwick)

Further progress being impossible the 1/5 Somersets stood fast until dusk allowed them to retreat to Beit Izza, carrying their casualties with them.

'It was a sad and melancholy business, this retirement, and very, very slow owing to the difficulty of carrying the dead and wounded down the steep rocky ground. I was very thankful to find our CO and Adjutant quite safe. I told them all that happened and my own private opinion of it too, for the strain of the day had told on me, and we had lost too many good NCOs and men.⁷ Besides I was much upset by poor Banes Walker's death. Of course it is a soldier's duty to obey orders and above all not to criticize; but I am convinced if our own CO had been allowed to control our part in the show the attack would not have been such a ghastly failure, neither would so many valuable lives have been recklessly thrown away. Needless to say I got told off very properly for having given way to overwrought feelings.' (Milsom)

So ended the first day's campaign for the capture of El Jib, with the Somersets bivouacking about 500 yards south of Beit Izza. Their War Diary records the casualties: one officer killed, nine ORs killed, three officers wounded, 23 ORs wounded, two ORs missing. The 1/4 Wilts had been deployed to protect the advance guard's right flank in the afternoon and covered its retreat; their War Diary lists two ORs killed and 19 wounded.

The Attack on El Jib: Day Two, November 23rd 1917
'The Valley of Death'

Before the weary officers of the 1/5 Somersets settled down to sleep late on the 22nd, they had learnt that in the morning they would be required to make a direct attack on El Jib. Early on the 23rd Major Urwick accompanied Brigadier Colston to a small hill 'from which we could get a good view. El Jib is a natural stronghold ... and looking at it from the West, as we did, it stood out about 2000 yards away, a high-terraced rocky hill, with the village standing on the left shoulder. On the right were the lofty slopes of Nabi Samweil, and on the left was high ground and ridges leading forward from Beit Izza. The approach to El Jib was through a valley 600 to 700 yards wide ... Altogether it looked a very strong position to take without artillery support, and with a Battalion which had been so reduced it could only go into action with about 400 bayonets' (Urwick).

The Nabi Samweil ridge on the South side of the valley was dominated by the mosque built over the alleged site of the tomb of the prophet Samuel. The mosque had been captured late on November 21st and on the 22nd had been subjected to furious Turkish and German counter-attacks and artillery bombardments during which 'the shrine of the Prophet, which was supported by four ancient and massive silver lanterns was smashed to pieces by a direct hit.' The British clung on at the mosque but the Turks still occupied the northern slopes of the ridge, there being no artillery to dislodge them.

'Immediately our extended lines emerged from the end of the valley the enemy left off shelling Nabi Samweil and opened a very heavy fire of HE and shrapnel on us. The men advanced in perfect formation as if on parade. Soon the leading waves . . . came under intense machine-gun and rifle fire and suffered heavy casualties. The enemy machine-guns were situated on the northern slopes of Nabi Samweil, in El Jib itself and also on the slopes and ridges to the left . . . The Battalion was therefore subjected to the most severe enfilade fire but went pressing on, without a check, right up to the terraces of the rocky hill. Seeing the three leading Companies, despite losses, pushing on so bravely and knowing how few we were in number ... I sent in the reserve Company and also the fighting part of my HQ with Captain Major my second-in-command' (Urwick).

'Directly the artillery barrage was passed the bullets began to fly around and the air was full of them. Every other man seemed to be falling, it was terrible the lines just melted away. One bullet went through the pugri of my helmet. It didn't worry me as I was far too concerned about the progress of the attack, but I felt I should 'stop one' soon. The next instant my right foot went out of action, there was no pain simply a numbing shock. As luck would have it there was a low heap of stones a few yards in front, and to this I vigorously hopped. The blood was spurting in a thick stream from my ankle, but a man named Pennell (one of my Lewis gunners, the only one left in the Company by this time) hastily slashed the boot off and bandaged the ankle with my field dressing; also to stop the bleeding he improvised a tourniquet round my leg ... I popped my head over the stones and a hail of bullets pattered round so I hastily popped it down again . . . There was only a handful of my Company near and they were mostly wounded. Dusk was our only hope and for that we waited, praying that in the meantime no bullet or shell would come to finish us off. It was the longest day I have ever known; the loss of blood made me weak and feverish and I was much upset by this second catastrophe' (Milsom)

'It was found that when the attacking waves reached the rock' (on which El Jib stands) 'that the terraces were so high and steep that it was almost impossible to climb them, but the men went forward with wonderful bravery and small parties actually succeeded in reaching the village, where they were wiped out' (Urwick).

In the Book of Remembrance's most emotional passage Stanley Goodland and Harry Milsom wrote, 'It is to be recorded in these annals with real pride that three Lewis gun sections succeeded, with great difficulty and bravery, in scaling these terraces. They were all either killed or taken prisoners and their guns lost, but their

deed remains an heroic example for all time.'

'The enemy's fire of every description continued throughout the day

... Every officer who went forward with the Companies was either killed or wounded. Captain Goodland asked me to allow him to go forward and see what he could do, but I knew the position was quite hopeless, and that he would only be throwing his life away, so I refused ... Of personal experiences of that day, early in the advance a bullet struck the satchel of my box respirator which had luckily slipped round to the front, passed through it and the middle of the tin containing charcoal, then through my thick riding breeches and struck me in the lower part of the stomach. It had been fired at a considerable range and these obstacles broke its force and turned it sideways so that although making a bruise it did not break the skin.¹² (Urwick)

'How the day dragged on. I thought the sun would never go down. But at last it grew dusk and as I was unable even to hobble along they got a stretcher and carried me back ... All the wounded could not be got in for the Turks came down and bombed them . . . Poor young [2/Lt WA] Hannaford's body was never recovered. [2/Lt G] Clarke and [2/Lt] Foster were both wounded, and as I was being carried back I heard someone say, "Here is Capt Major, stone dead". So poor old Major had gone, too! It appeared he was wounded early in the day and killed outright by a shell whilst crawling to cover. Again I was greatly relieved to find Major Urwick and Capt Goodland both safe and sound and they were equally pleased to find me still alive.' (Milsom)

'At nightfall the Battalion was ordered to withdraw to the same bivouac area it had left in the morning . . . Our wounded were collected... We managed to bring back Captain Major's body and buried him that night, close to our bivouac. Our Padre read the burial service, with myself, the Adjutant, Captain Calway] and one or two men standing by. After all we had gone through that day, this simple ceremony I shall always remember as one of the most impressive in which I have ever taken part. Captain Major] was a fine Christian gentleman, and very brave soldier¹³. My last recollection that night was of poor Milsom] who was badly wounded in the foot, and I, who had settled down by the side of his stretcher both enjoying a cigarette from a fifty-tin which Captain C.[alway] had very kindly given us - a very valuable present, as we were all out of smokes of any kind by this time'. (Urwick)

'Our Medical Officer - a splendid fellow - bandaged me up and at the same time confided in me that he did not think I should see much more of this war; however, I did not worry overmuch at this bit of news, as I was feeling particularly tired of war just then.' (Milsom).

In the Battalion War Diary for November 23rd, which Stanley Goodland must have written that night, the casualty list shows: two officers and eight ORs killed, three officers and 132 ORs wounded and 32 ORs missing, most of whom were later numbered with the dead. Urwick notes that in January 1918 the 74th Division, which occupied El Jib weeks after the fall of Jerusalem, returned 27 identity discs to the Battalion. 'I believe they also buried two men they could not identify.' The Roll of Honour in the Book of Remembrance carries the definitive list of those who died on November 23rd: three sergeants, and 39 private soldiers, as well as the two officers

already named.

After The Battle: November 24th, 25th & 26th, 1917

'A Well-earned Rest'

NOVEMBER 24th: 'As I was being carried away on a camel to the nearest Clearing Station the brutes shelled our convoy: it put the wind up me horribly as one felt so helpless stuck up on top of a camel, and such a target, too! But no-one was hit, luckily.' (Milsom)

'Early next morning an unlucky shell wounded nine more men. I saw the Brigadier and finding we were allowed a well-earned rest, I asked if I could move the Battalion further down the valley where the steep sides would protect us from shell fire, which request he granted . . . That night as Goodland and I settled down ... we said, "Thank goodness we shall get a night's rest to-night"; but so uncertain is the life of a soldier we had not been asleep long when we received orders to be ready as quickly as possible to march back to [Kuryet el] Enab'. (Urwick).

After a night march blundering across open country the Battalion hit the Roman road which 'since we came along it on the 21st had been made into something that deserved the name of road and was now passable for artillery ... We arrived at [Kuryet el] Enab 0030 and bivouacked under the hill which we had taken on the 20th'. (Urwick)

NOVEMBER 25th: 'Remained in bivouac at [Kuryet el] Enab. Some of our wounded passed down that day in motor ambulances and I shouted to Milsom] as he went by' (Urwick)

'The last I saw of my poor old Battalion there was but a handful of them, Companies commanded by sergeants and corporals! Still the CO and Adjutant carried on - and kept smiling too - a perfectly wonderful couple.' (Milsom)

NOVEMBER 26th: 'The [233rd] Brigade marched to Junction Station . . . The men's boots were very bad, owing to the rough, stony hill work. In one or two cases the soles had completely gone and the men had tied sandbags to their feet. But the 215 men who were left were all hard nuts, and glad to be alive, and they sang cheerily throughout the march.'

'So ended the part played by my Division in trying to cut the North communications of Jerusalem.' (Urwick).