

# The Thrilling Story of the Moonlight Battle for the Possession of Bagdad

(By Edmund Candler.)

The last fighting before Baghdad is likely to become historic on account of the splendid gallantry of our troops in the crossing of the Tigris river. After the action at Ladj the Turkish rearward fell back on Djalal, destroying the bridge which crosses the stream at its junction with the Tigris. We pushed on in pursuit on the left bank, sending cavalry and two columns of infantry to work round on the right bank, and to enter Baghdad from the west. Speed in following up was essential, and the column attacking Djalal was faced with another crossing in which the element of surprise was eliminated. The village lies on both banks of the stream, which is 120 yards wide. The houses, trees, nullah, and walled gardens made it impossible to build a road and ramps quickly and to bring up pontoons without betraying the point of embarkation. Hence the old bridgehead site was chosen. The attack on the night of the 7th was checked, but the quality of courage shown by our men has never been surpassed in war. Immediately the first pontoon was lowered over the ramp the whole launching party was shot down in a few seconds. It was a bright moonlight, and the Turks had concentrated their machine guns and rifles in the houses on the opposite bank.

The second pontoon had got into the middle of the stream, when a terrific fusillade was opened on it. The crew of five rowers and ten riflemen were killed and the boat floated down the stream. A third got nearly across, but was bombed and sank. All the crew were killed. But there was no holding back. The orders still held to secure the passage. Crew after crew pushed off to an obvious and certain death. The fourth crossing party was exterminated in the same way and the pontoons drifted out to the Tigris to float past our camp in the daylight with their freight of dead. The drafts who went over were raised by volunteers from other battalions in the brigade. These and the sappers on the bank shared the honor of the night with the attacking battalion. Nothing stopped them, save the loss of the pontoons. A Lancashire man remarked: "It is a bit hot here, but let's try it higher up," but the gallant fellows were reduced to their last boat. Another regiment, which was to cross higher up, were delayed, as the boats had to be carried nearly a mile across country to the stream. After the failure of the bridgehead passage the second crossing was cancelled, but the men were still game.

On the second night the attempt was pursued with equal gallantry. This time the attack was preceded by a bombardment. Registering by artillery had been impossible on the first day in the speed of the pursuit. It was the barrage that secured us the footing—not the shells, but the dust raised by them. This was so thick that you could not see your hand in front of your face. It formed a curtain behind which ten boats were able to cross. Afterwards, in clear moonlight, when the curtain of dust had lifted, the conditions of the night before were re-established. Succeeding crossing parties were exterminated, and pontoons drifted away, but a footing was secured. The dust served us well. The crew of one boat which lost its way during the barrage were untouched, but they did not make the bank in time. Directly the air cleared a machine gun was opened on them and the rowers were shot down and the pontoons drifted back ashore. A sergeant called to volunteers to get the wounded out of the boat and a party of twelve men went over the river bank. Every man of them, as well as the crew of the pontoons, were killed.

Some 80 men had got over and these joined up and started bombing along the bank. They were soon heavily pressed by the Turks on both flanks and found themselves between two woods.

Here they discovered a providential natural position. A break in the river bend had been repaired by a new bund built in a half-moon on the landward side. This formed a perfect lunette. The Lancashire men, surrounded on all sides but the river, held it through the night, all the next day and the next night against repeated and determined attacks. Those attacks were delivered in the dark or at dawn. The Turks only attacked once in the daylight, as our machine guns on the other bank swept the ground in front of the position. Twenty yards west of the lunette there was a thin grove of mulberries and palms. The pontoon was most vulnerable on this side, and it was here that the Turkish counter-attacks were most frequent. Our intense intermittent artillery fire day and night on the wood afforded some protection. The whole affair was visible to our troops on the south side, who were able to make themselves heard by shouting. Attempts to get a cable across with a rocket for the passage of ammunition failed.

At midnight on the 9th and 10th the Turks were driven back. One more determined rush would have

carried the lunette, but the little garrison, now reduced to 40, kept their heads and maintained cool control of their fire. A corporal was seen searching for loose rounds and emptying the handbills of the dead. In the end they were reduced almost to their last clip and one bomb, but we found over 100 Turkish dead outside the redoubt when they were relieved at daylight. The crossing on the night of the 9th and 10th was entirely successful. With our cavalry and two columns of infantry working round on the right bank the Turks were in danger of being cut off, as at Sanna-i-Yat. Before midnight they had withdrawn their machine guns, leaving only riflemen to dispute the passage. The crossing upstream was a surprise. We slipped through the Turkish guard. He had pickets at both ends of the river salient where we dropped our pontoons. But he overlooked essential points in it which offered us dead ground uncovered by posts up and down stream. Consequently our passage here lost us no lives. The other ferry near the bridge was also crossed with slight loss, owing to a diversion up-stream. The Turks, perceiving that their flank was being turned, effected a general retirement of the greater part of their garrison between the two ferries. Some 250 in all, finding us bombing down on both flanks, surrendered. The upper crossing was so unexpected that a Turk was actually bayoneted as he lay covering the opposite bank with his rifle.

By 9:30 on the morning of the 10th the whole brigade had crossed. Soon after 11 the brigade was complete and the pursuit continued. The Turks continued their rearward action, and in the afternoon there was fighting in the palm groves of Salda, and the Turks were cleared with the bayonet after artillery had combed the wood. The main body was holding the El Mahomed position, one and a half miles further north—a trench line running nearly four miles inland from the Tigris. We attacked this in front, while another column made a wide turning movement on the flank, and the enemy evacuated it at night. On the morning of the 12th we entered Baghdad. Our force on the right bank, after defeating the Turkish rearward in two actions, reached the suburb on the opposite side of the Bridge of Boats. A brigade was ferried across in coracles, and at noon they hoisted the Union Jack on the citadel. Meanwhile the cavalry continued the pursuit and occupied Kaxmalin after slight resistance. Four damaged aeroplanes and 100 prisoners were taken, in addition to the 200 captured on the left bank. The gunboats are still in pursuit of

the enemy, who are reported to be entrenching 16 miles north of Baghdad, covering the entrapment of troops.

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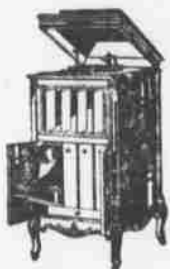


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