

NOTE

This is a preliminary narrative and should not be regarded as authoritative. It has not been checked for accuracy in all aspects, and its interpretations are not necessarily those of the Historical Section as a whole.

Ce texte est préliminaire et n'a aucun caractère officiel. On n'a pas vérifié son exactitude et les interprétations qu'il contient ne sont pas nécessairement celles du Service historique.

Directorate of History
National Defence Headquarters
Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0K2
July 1986

REPORT NO. 84
HISTORICAL SECTION (G.S.)
ARMY HEADQUARTERS

20 Oct 59

Canadians in Mesopotamia,
1918-1919

1. We have noted, in the account of intervention in Siberia (Report No. 83, Historical Section (G.S.), A.H.Q., 20 Oct 59.), that British forces landed at Baku and Batum in Southern Russia during November, 1918. But those landings were not the first venture by the British into this area. A short-lived occupation of Baku by troops from Mesopotamia took place earlier in 1918, and Canadians took part in the operations; this Report is a preliminary account of their activities.
2. The reasons for Allied intervention in Russia have been examined. (Ibid.) We have already seen that it was essential to prevent German exploitation of Caspian oil. Furthermore, the British were acutely interested in the Persian, Caucasus and Caspian regions; for not only did an advance there by the Central Powers directly affect their Mesopotamian campaign, but it prejudiced the security of India's immediate hinterland. Berlin—Batum—Baku—Bokhara was a more dangerous enemy route to the Indian frontier than Berlin—Baghdad. (John Buchan, A History of the Great War, Vol. 4 (London, 1922), 298-9.)
3. The situation following Russian suspension of hostilities in December 1917 was exceedingly complicated. Three peoples – the Georgians, the Armenians, and the Azerbaidjan Tartars – constituted the majority of the mixed population living south of the Caucasus range and the borders of Turkey and Persia. Russia's political control over the Trans-Caucasus disappeared after the Bolshevik Revolution and, through anarchy among the Russian troops, military control collapsed. A Trans-Caucasian Government was formed under the influence of the Georgians, politically the most mature of the peoples, which in November proclaimed an independent republic to include Georgians, Armenians, and Tartars, despite religious differences and traditional animosities. In March 1918 came the Brest Litovsk Treaty ceding Batum, Kars, and Ardahan to Turkey. Outside influences then made themselves felt. The Turks advanced and, ignoring the treaty-terms, began to seize the whole Caucasus region by means of the Moslem inhabitants; Germany – determined to control Baku and its oil-fields – could in no-wise permit this. Beset by the rival influences of Turkey and Germany, the newly formed Trans-Caucasian republic collapsed and split up; an independent Armenian republic of Erivan was proclaimed in May under Turkish protection; a Tartar republic under the Turks, and to include Baku, was established in the same month. Georgia, on the other had, welcomed a German expeditionary force as protection from Turkish invasion. Baku was the only Bolshevik stronghold, and on this the Turks were advancing in defiance of the Germans. (Ibid. William Henry Chamberlin, The Russian Revolution, Vol. 2 (New York, 1952), 406-11.).

4. The nearest British troops were small parties in Persia and the army in Mesopotamia, and their problems were already sufficiently complex. Firstly, the road from Baghdad to the Caspian must be kept open against Turkish incursions from the west. This road, about 630 miles long, crossed a devastated and famine-stricken area through Khaniqin, Kermanshah, and Hamadan to Enzeli, on the Caspian. It climbed a succession of mountain ranges and was in a bad state of repair, difficult in good weather, impassable in bad. The task was made more hazardous by the uncertain attitude of the tribes along the route, and of the Persians; one of these tribes, the Jangalis, on the south-western shores of the Caspian, was being encouraged by Turko-German agents and Bolsheviks, as well as the extreme section of Persian nationalists, to oppose all British action. Indeed, Jangali tribesmen, in co-operation with the Bolsheviks, controlled the approaches to the port of Enzeli and were well armed. Secondly, the advance of Bolsheviks (and Austrian prisoners of war freed by them) into the area east of the Caspian must be checked, or they would join with hostile elements there to form a serious threat to Afghanistan and India.
 ** Finally, if the Eastern front was to be restored, the Caspian and its shipping must be under Allied control, and this meant that Baku had to be taken and defended against the Turks. (Buchan, History of the Great War, 299-300. British Official History, The Campaign in Mesopotamia 1914-1918., Vol. 4, 105-6).

5. It was clear at the beginning of 1918 that sufficient British forces were not available from any theatre for dispatch to this area. As an indication of what an adequate force might be, the Caucasus-Persian front had been held by between 100,000 and 200,000 Russian troops; many, indeed, were still in Persia, but it was evident that they could not be relied on much longer as an effective barrier to hostile penetration eastwards. Another barrier was urgently required, but how was it to be provided? It seemed that to organize a local defensive force from Georgians, Armenians, Assyrians, and Russian volunteers was the only feasible answer. (The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 102-3). To this end, a British Mission to the Caucasus was authorized by the War Office on 14 January 1918. At its head was Major-General L.C. Dunsterforce, who arrived in Baghdad from India on the 18th with orders to proceed to Tiflis as British representative to the Trans-Caucasian Government. It was foreseen that he would need 150 officers and 300 N.C.Os. – who were the nucleus of Dunsterforce – for the main purpose “of organizing, training, and leading native troops to be raised from the tribes of Asia Minor and Mesopotamia.” (Ibid., 104-5. Report of the Ministry, O.M.F.C. 1918, 20.)

6. To Dunsterforce, Canada contributed 15 officers and 26 N.C.Os., of “strong character, adventurous spirit, especially good stamina, capable of organizing, training, and eventually leading, irregular troops”. (“The Dunsterforce”, file G.A.Q. 10-28). All came from the Canadian Corps (although three who were medically unfit were replaced in England) and left the Western Front for England on 13 January. Officers below the rank of captain were made acting captains, while junior N.C.Os. and men became acting sergeants. In London the Canadian contingent joined others from the British, Australian, New Zealand, and South African forces, together with a party of fourteen Russian

* It should be noted that this danger was effectively removed by a British force from North-East Persia under command of Major-General W. Malleson which occupied Krasnovodsk on the Eastern shore of the Caspian during August 1918. This operation, although it had immense political importance for Britain, is not part of our present story, and will not be further described.

officers and one Persian. The aim, they were told, apart from training and leading, was to protect the Baku oilfields, to operate against the Turks from the east and “to hold the Batum—Tiflis—Baku—Krasnovodsk line to Afghanistan” – all in all, an ambitious programme. (Ibid.)

7. It was not until 2 March that the Western Front contingent, including the Canadians, reached Basrah in Mesopotamia. At Basrah the long voyage up the river Tigris to Baghdad began, all parties assembling in camps south of the city by the end of March. The journey passed pleasantly enough for the Canadians, for a large percentage of the officers and crews of the river craft was made up of British Columbians.* Reunions were numerous and entertaining. (Ibid., Letter, D.H.S. from ex-C.S.M. R.W. Gornwall, 17 Mar 31.)
8. Meanwhile Dunsterville had left Baghdad with a small staff at the end of January, hoping to be in Baku – then under the control of the Trans-Caucasian Government – a fortnight later. He was delayed at Hamadan by bad weather and the necessity for undertaking famine relief. The swift onrush of events which followed Brest Litovsk found him still at Hamadan; chaotic conditions prevailing in the Caucasus precluded an onward journey to Baku en route to Tiflis. He was ordered to remain in Persia, where he began to organize and train local levies and effect road improvements using for these tribesmen unfit for military service. (The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 106-7, 116, 119.)
9. Even in Persia, circumstances were not reassuring, and Dunsterville requested reinforcements. Local brigands robed and murdered without hindrance along the lonely passes. Demoralized Russians, completely bolshevized, wandered at will throughout the area. Famine stalked the land. Jangali tribesmen, Austrian-trained and German-led, were astride the road to Enzeli, while a hundred miles to the west, in the mountains of Kurdistan, the operations of a Turkish army threatened the line of communication. (Captain W. W. Murray, “Canadians in Dunsterforce”, Canadian Defence Quarterly, January 1931, 215-16.)
10. Into this maelstrom the Canadians marched via Kermanshah, thence to Hamadan through the Asadabad Pass in the Pistokosh mountains. They joined Dunsterville during the early part of July, and were at once dispersed to placate distant tribes, train local levies, supervise road construction, and to protect and police the road to Hamadan. (“The Dunsterforce”, file G.A.Q. 10-28). Together with local forces, a brigade was being formed at Hamadan from Christian Assyrians who had fled thither in July following a massacre by Turks and Kurds in Kurdistan which cost over 40,000 lives. Seven Canadians played a manful part in the protective rearguard which was hastily improvised by Dunsterforce to enable the Assyrians to reach Hamadan (“Canadians in Dunsterforce”, C.D.Q., April 1931, 380-1). One Russian force remained loyal to the allies – that of General Bicharakoff who had himself turned Bolshevik a month before as being the only means of retaining a foothold in this region. He accepted the post of the commander of

* Some 5 officers and 23 other ranks were provided by the C.E.F. in England for special service in Mesopotamia. They were obtained from pioneers recruited in B.C. (1st Overseas Canadian Pioneer Details, Vancouver) and attached to Inland Water Transport R.E. for work on the Tigris. They served for three years after arrival in July 1916.

the Red Army in the Caucasus, which did not prevent his continued co-operation with Dunsterville. A Canadian, Major H.E. Newcombe, was ordered to join Bicharakoff, subsequently accompanying him throughout the Caucasus. He is, so far as is known, the only Canadian who ever saw active service with the Red Army. (Ibid. 385. The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 183).

11. On 20 July, the Jangali force of about 2500 attacked a 500 man British detachment at Resht, near Enzeli. They were beaten off, and thereafter communications to Enzeli remained undisturbed. Five days later, Bicharakoff, assisted by a few officers and four armored cars from Dunsterforce, staged a coup d'état in Baku, which was successful. The Bolchevik members of the government resigned, and the new government, terming itself Centro-Caspian, handed over supreme military command to Bicharakoff, whose first act was to ask for British aid. Dunsterville, although he had received few of the reinforcements requested a month before, accepted the invitation. (The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 200-203).
12. Some troops of the 7th North Staffordshire arrived at Baku from Enzeli on 4 August. Inspired by their presence, local forces next day repulsed a Turkish attack. During the middle of August, the British defence force was increased to two battalions as reinforcements arrived in North Persia. Six Canadian officers in all proceeded to Baku. It was necessary to divert some troops, intended for Baku, to meet a Turkish advance from Kurdistan which threatened to cut the line of communications to Enzeli. In Baku, 22 local infantry battalions, mostly Armenian, with a total strength of about 6000, were attempting to hold a twelve mile line of defence. The local troops were poorly organized, had few officers, and were "so lacking in discipline that they left their positions whenever they pleased", (Ibid., 204, 212, 215) while the defensive-line was poorly sited.

The line of defence, which was very indefinite, lay for the most part along the crest of stony cliffs, from which the fire was plunging and ineffective. There were very few trenches, such rifle pits as existed being badly sited, and there was no wire. The whole line was so close to the town and harbor that the enemy guns... could bombard the whole place without difficulty. (Ibid., 215).

13. The Turks attacked on 26 August. Four separate attacks were repulsed by the North Staffordshire. The fifth was successful owing to local troops giving no support, which enabled the Turks to bring enfilading fire to bear causing heavy losses. Some ground was lost. A further Turkish attack, four days later, again gained ground. On 31 August, Russians and Armenians held their positions for only an hour in the face of another attack, when they retired hurriedly. The 9th royal Warwickshire, both flanks uncovered, was obliged to fall back, fighting a rearguard action which cost it seventy casualties. So far the British had done all the fighting, the local troops having consistently failed to support them. Captain Robert Harrison, a Canadian commanding the 24th Armenian Battalion, found that his unit ceased to exist on occasions through the predisposition of his men to scamper off at the first appearance of the enemy. Dunsterville was heavily outnumbered. He now had 900 British troops, including a field battery, and about 1000 Russians on whom he could rely. The enemy was employing 6000 regulars and 8000

irregulars, while the town swarmed with enemy sympathizers and agents. (*Ibid.*, 223-4, 225-229, 232. “Canadians in Dunsterforce”, *C.D.Q.*, January 1932, 235).

14. By 12 September the British had in Baku the equivalent of three battalions... the 7th Staffordshire, 9th Worcestershire, the 9th Royal Warwickshire (less one company) and one platoon of the ¼ Hampshire. To this force was added 500 of Bicharakoff's men, with ten machine guns. Major Newcombe had already arrived in Baku on 19 August, and was given the job of paymaster, field cashier, and chancellor of the Baku exchequer. Of the other Canadians, Major J.W. Van der Berg was given supervision over the entire machine-gun situation in and around Baku. A third, Colonel John Warden, became Inspector of Infantry. A fourth, Captain G.S. Hopkins, was assisting in arranging supplies. Harrison, as we have seen, was *de facto* commander of an Armenian battalion. Captain A.H. Gilmour, the sixth Canadian, was dispatched by sea on a mission to the British force under Malleson on the eastern Caspian. Warned that a Turkish attack would take place on the 14th, Dunsterville inspected the line. Preparations were rushed to meet the projected onslaught. By the night of the 13th he was satisfied that the Turks could be held if the troops showed the will to fight. (*Ibid.*, 238. “Canadians in Dunsterforce”, *C.D.Q.*; July 1931, 489-90; January 1932, 238).
15. The offensive began at dawn the next day. Dunsterville's misgivings were amply justified. The Turks broke clean through an Armenian battalion at the strongest part of the line and the position was soon hopeless. Only a stand by the British battalions, which inflicted heavy losses on the Turks*, allowed the British to withdraw that night in two armed ships without interference from the enemy. Even the withdrawal was fraught with danger, as the ships had to pass under the guns of the Russian fleet; one transport was fired on. The force, however, got through to Enzeli without loss of life. (*The Campaign in Mesopotamia*, 242-8).
16. Three days later, orders were issued recalling General Dunsterville and disbanding his mission. (*Ibid.*, 249). Canadian members were offered four choices of employment – with irregulars in the near East, with Indian infantry in Mesopotamia or elsewhere, in a newly formed North Persian force (Norperforce), or with their original units in France. Two officers and two N.C.Os. joined the irregulars, and the same number Norperforce. Two officers and three N.C.Os. left for the British Military Mission to Siberia. The remainder chose the fourth alternative. (“The Dunsterforce”, file G.A.Q. 10-28)
17. The oil at Baku was not destroyed but the delay imposed by the short-lived occupation, through readiness to exploit events, served its purpose. The Turks, foreseeing the loss of their Arabian provinces and looking to the occupation of the Caucasus as compensation, controlled the oilfields in defiance of a compact with Germany – but not until September. Then, on 30 October 1918, the armistice with Turkey provided for an Allied occupation of Baku, effected by the British Norperforce on 17 November. (*The Campaign in Mesopotamia*, 208, 248, 323, 330).

* Estimated at 2000. British casualties were 125.

18. Dunsterforce failed to penetrate to Tiflis and never created Caucasian forces to hold the line between Batum, Tiflis and Baku. But the forces mustered in North Persia, wildly exaggerated by local rumor, were sufficient to hold a Turkish army immobile in Kurdistan, thus protecting the flank of the Mesopotamia Force and discouraging hostile penetration to the East. Though an immediate failure, the operations of Dunsterforce must be rated an ultimate success. (Ibid., 171, 172, 174, 178-9, 186, 207. "Canadians in Dunsterforce", C.D.Q., January 1931, 210.)
19. This report was compiled by Capt. J.A. Swettenham, R.C.E.

(G.W.L. Nicholson) Colonel
Director Historical Section