

July I occupied, with two companies of the 13th Rajputs. Mahmudiyah, from which place reports of a concentration for an attack on Baghdad had been received. On the evening of that date the last train (an ammunition train) that was to reach Hillah from Baghdad for some weeks got through safely, the line behind it being out at night. On the 2nd August I ordered this line to be protected by blockhouses, the construction of which was to begin from both ends and to be pushed on as rapidly as labour and troops for garrisons became available. This work could not begin until the 6th August.

(49) On the afternoon of the 3rd August a serious fire, due to incendiaries, occurred at the main Mechanical Transport Depot, the entire headquarters' reserve stock of spare parts and tyres for the Expeditionary Force being destroyed before the flames could be extinguished. I thereupon ordered all Arab labourers to be discharged from Government employment and sent a general warning throughout the country for special precautions to be taken against incendiarism. The order regarding the employment of Arab labour was shortly afterwards modified so as to admit of skilled labour being retained.

*The Concentration at Hillah.*

(50) Meanwhile the concentration of troops at Hillah was in progress, an operation on the successful issue of which I felt that our tenure of Mesopotamia, and with it our position in North-west Persia, hung. The necessity for avoiding any delay had been expressly laid down in my order, as I felt it possible that the insurgents, who had already displayed their predilection for the destruction of railways, might go a step further and make all movement by that means impossible. To make use of the railway was essential, as six days' rations for the whole force, which included 1,120 railway personnel, water amounting to 23,000 gallons, sick, and a large quantity of ammunition had to be carried, for which the available road transport was quite insufficient.

(51) The force was commanded by Brigadier-General Coningham, C.M.G., D.S.O., and was composed as follows:—

- 37th Lancers (two squadrons),
- 97th Battery, R.F.A. (less one section),
- 131st (How.) Battery, R.F.A.
- 132nd (How.) Battery, R.F.A. (one section),
- 45th Mountain Battery,
- 61st Company, 2nd (Q.V.O.) Sappers and Miners),
- 45th (Rattray's) Sikhs,
- 87th Punjabis,
- 1/99th (Deccan) Infantry,
- 1/10th Gurkha Rifles,
- and certain details.

As the force leaving Diwanayah on the 30th July proceeded north to Jarbuiyah, it was joined by troops from various posts on the line of communication, namely:—

- 131st (How.) Battery, R.F.A. (one section),
- 114th Mahrattas (1½ companies),
- 1/116th Mahrattas (one company),
- 1/32nd Sikh Pioneers (less 1¼ companies),
- 108th Infantry (½ company),
- 86th Carnatic Infantry.

(52) On the 31st July a force of 500 mounted and 1,500 dismounted Arabs, which was following the column along the left bank of the Euphrates, was engaged by artillery fire at 1,000 yards' range, and suffered heavily.

(53) On the 5th August, on approaching Jarbuiyah bridge, the insurgents, who were in strength, were engaged by the 1/10th Gurkhas, who crossed to the left bank of the river, and the 1/99th Infantry, and suffered heavy casualties, 200 dead being counted. Up to this date an average of only 5½ miles a day had been covered. This slow rate of progress was due to the damage caused to the railway line, which, between Guchan and Jarbuiyah, had been systematically destroyed. In places stretches of a mile or more had been torn up and removed. The repair material carried on the train soon became exhausted, and the only means by which the train of sixty trucks, which had increased to five engines and over 200 trucks at Guchan, could advance, was by picking up rails and sleepers in rear, transporting them to the front, a distance of over a mile, and then relaying them. Moreover, a road alongside the railway to allow of the movement of guns and transport had to be made throughout almost the whole distance traversed.

(54) From Jarbuiyah, on the 6th August, while work on the railway north of that place was in progress, punitive operations were carried out, and on the 7th, after leaving as garrison the 86th Carnatics, one section 45th Mountain Battery, and one section Sappers and Miners, the column continued its march.

(55) On the 8th August troops from Hillah, with a construction train, went out to meet General Coningham's column, and the two forces joined hands at 11 a.m., after encountering slight opposition. The line between the point where the two columns met and Hillah had been badly damaged for 3,760 yards. This section was restored by 4.45 p.m., and at 10.15 p.m. the trains of both columns reached Hillah, bringing in all civilians, sick and wounded. Next day the remainder of General Coningham's column reached Hillah.

(56) The operation of withdrawing the force from Diwanayah, which had occupied eleven days under the most trying weather conditions, reflects the highest credit on the skill and resolution of the commander and the endurance of the troops.

*Attacks on Hillah.*

(57) The effect of the reverse on the 25th July had soon made itself apparent in and near Hillah. The Albu Sultan tribe rose on the 28th and destroyed the railway line south of that place. On the night of the 27th/28th July Hillah was attacked, and on the night of the 31st July/1st August the insurgents broke into the town, but were driven out by the gallantry of the 8th Rajputs. The attack was made in considerable force, and the Arabs lost heavily, leaving 149 dead on the ground.

*Operations North of Hillah.*

(58) In anticipation of the return of General Coningham's column to Hillah, I had given orders for certain operations to begin directly that event occurred. With this object two columns were prepared as follows:—

- 55th Brigade Column, under Brigadier-General H. A. Walker, C.M.G., D.S.O.