

# WITH DUNSTERVILLE'S "LOST LEGION"

## New Zealander's Account of Hazardous Expedition



**T**OWARDS the end of 1917, under the seal of absolute secrecy, a plan was hatched in London to fill the gap left by the collapse of Russia for the infiltration of enemy propaganda into Asia via the Caucasus and Persia. Hence the "Hush Hush Army," a body of officers and N.C.O.'s each fastidiously handpicked from every front, France, Salonika, Palestine, Mesopotamia—representing every part of the British Empire—in fact, a microcosm of Anglo-Saxondom in arms.

It was this highly picked force that General Dunsterville was ordered to lead in a desperate attempt to deal with the newly-arisen situation. It was originally intended to organise, with Tiflis as centre, the Christian populations of the Caucasus against the then unopposed Turkish arms. It was physically impossible for either London or Baghdad to keep in touch with the kaleidoscopic changes of the situation which compelled complete modification of the original plan . . . and the world heard with amazement, during the last fortnight of August, 1918, that a British force had occupied Baku.

To-day the eyes of the world are again focused on those same Eastern regions and again British soldiers are carrying out hazardous assignments there. But even to-day little is known of that earlier heroic enterprise which began so promisingly and ended in such chaos. Thirty-six New Zealanders enlisted in General Dunsterville's "Lost Legion," some of them to meet death in strange places under a strange sky. One survivor of the expedition, however, lives in Wellington, and here is the story he tells of his adventures with "the Dunsterforce."

**T**HE N.Z.E.F. in France was undoubtedly mystified by the selection early in 1918 of twelve officers and twenty-four non-commissioned officers for a special mission, the object of which was at that time a closely-guarded secret. On January 29 the nucleus of the party, some 350 men, sailed from Southampton, later to be reinforced by further commissioned and non-commissioned troops from the Salonika, Palestine, and Mesopotamia fronts.

Each soldier chosen was supposed to possess a host of qualifications which covered education, bravery, initiative, and service. The result, when final selections had been made, was a pleasing one, and the little force comprised men from England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Russia. A point which interested us at the time was the special

stress laid on the danger of the mission—we were assured that it meant almost certain death to the greater number of us. Most of us dismissed this pessimism as an official scarecrow hoisted to frighten off the faint-hearted. How far wrong we were, we soon found out.

### Luxury in a Turkish Barracks

Our journey lay from Southampton to Cherbourg, through France and Italy by train, by liner to Alexandria, across Egypt, and by transport steamer to Basra. We disembarked at Basra, collected our impedimenta, and marched through sweltering heat to the old Turkish barracks at Ashar. There we lived in the luxury of tinned rabbit, Japanese beer, lessons in Russian, and comparative idleness while headquarters waited for orders.

A fortnight later they came and on we went 500 miles up the Tigris by river boat to Baghdad. At Baghdad we were again delayed for five weeks, and had ample time to discover that the romance of the ancient city is over-emphasised. All that the majority of us

remembered about Baghdad was that it smelt abominably. From Baghdad we travelled by rail to Ruz, a big base camp behind the Mesopotamian firing line. From open trucks we had an excellent opportunity of observing the country, which was much greener and more fertile than the one we had just left. At Ruz we rested in flies, mud and rainstorms until April 22.

### Wake of the Armies

The next sixty miles of our journey were eventful. We loaded our baggage on to a column of hardy little motor cars, and after an early morning start set out through beautiful, flower-covered country in the direction of the Persian frontier. We passed through only one village of any consequence and we were appalled at the con-

clad bodies, lay huddled up in the streets with dead babies pressed against them. We immediately set to work to give what relief we could. Those who could work were allotted light tasks on the roads, at small but sufficient pay, together with a ticket which entitled them to one bowl of food daily. This we supplied at five soup kitchens, each of which prepared enough for 2500 people.

We remained in that city of the living dead for nearly a week and then, with camel transport, set out for the Caspian Sea. Daily we marched our break of ten, fifteen or twenty miles under a scorching sun, and at night camped sometimes on dusty wastes, sometimes among the greenery of fertile river plains. Here the strain of sustained marching first began to tell. Some sickened, but none complained.

### What We Were Doing

Here let me pause to give a summary of the work already performed by "the Dunsterforce," which was by this time scattered in small groups all over the country.



★ TOP LEFT: Three Arab pilgrims from Irak forgather in Meshed, capital of the Khorasan province of Iran (Persia)

CENTRE: The Gauther Shed mosque and enclosed fountain in Meshed, the "Mecca of Iran"

RIGHT: Two typical armed Kurdish tribesmen of Iraq



tion of its inhabitants. They were for the most part living—or dying—in a state of abject poverty, and seized hungrily on any food we offered them. Many lay on the roadsides, sick from hunger and disease; some were dying; some were already dead. The juggernaut in the form of Turkish and Russian armies had passed that way, leaving them crushed under its cruel wheels.

From Kasr-i-Shirin we marched in the approved book method, with points, connecting files, advance guards, and rear guards all supplied out of our small party. Pity us if we had met with a strong organised resistance. Nightly we picketed our camps, and by day we marched in battle order.

### Terrible Famine

At Hamadan we found the people in the grip of a terrible famine. Hundreds were dying daily, some in houses, many in the open streets. The supply of grave-diggers was so inadequate that the bodies were merely stacked in heaps and covered with a sprinkling of loose dirt. Women with emaciated, ill-

German propaganda was spreading to dissatisfied tribes in North-West India, and to break communications, we were supposed to establish posts all along the main and adjacent roads from the Caspian Sea to Baghdad; raise forces from among the natives; train, ration and pay them; and, with a couple of our own men in charge of each native force, occupy the posts and hold them, if need be, to the death. Surely there was never a more stupendous task allotted to so small a band in an unknown country among unknown people.

Recruits, well treated and well paid, were indeed enlisted, but they failed to justify our hopes.

### At Baku And After

Some distant genius had also conceived the idea of seizing Baku with its valuable oil wells, raising an army of Cossacks and Armenians, and holding it against the Turks. That was a colossal undertaking, especially when it is considered that the whole white force in Persia was then only a hundred

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