

63: Robert Metcalfe (Medcalfe)

Basic Information [as recorded on local memorial or by CWGC]

Name as recorded on local memorial or by CWGC: Robert Metcalfe

Rank: Private

Battalion / Regiment: 8th Bn. Cheshire Regiment

Service Number: 11383

Date of Death: 08 April 1916

Age at Death: 34*

Buried / Commemorated at: Basra Memorial, Al Basrah, Basra, Iraq

Additional information given by CWGC: The son of Joseph and Ann Metcalfe of Liverpool Road, Neston

* The age of 34 is known to be incorrect; Robert died on, or very close to, his 21st birthday

Robert Medcalfe - the family name is misspelled both on the memorial in Neston Parish Church and by the CWGC - was the son of Neston collier (sometime labourer) Joseph and Ann(ie) Medcalfe.

Note: Whilst the name is variously spelled Medcalf / Midcalf/ Metcalf / Metcalfe in the Parish Church records, it is known that the recognised family name was Medcalfe.

There were other families in Neston correctly named Metcalf(e).

Labourer Joseph *Metcalf* had married Ann(e) Campion of Parkgate at St Stephen's Church, Liverpool, in April / June 1877. Ann, a daughter of Parkgate fisherman John and Mary Campion, was baptised at Neston Parish Church on 8 August 1856. At the time of the 1881 census Joseph (25, born Flint) and Ann (24) were living at Pinnington's Yard, Neston, with their two children (Elizabeth, 2, and John, 3 months). Pinnington's Yard, entered by Pinnington's Weint off Neston High Street, had been the wood-yard of joiner John Pinnington.

In 1891, before Robert was born, the family was living on Brook Street:

Joseph Medcalfe	Head	M	36	Collier	2	Ann	34	Wife
Elizabeth	Da		13					
John	Da		10					
Joseph	Da		7					
Mary J.	Da		4					
Margaret	Da		2					
Fred	Da		6 months					

1891 census (extract) – Brook Street, Neston

Joseph Medcalfe	36	collier	born Flintshire
Ann	34		born Parkgate
Elizabeth	13		born Neston
John	10		born Neston
Joseph	7		born Neston
Mary J.	4		born Neston
Margaret	2		born Neston
Fred	6 months		born Neston

Robert was baptised at Neston Parish Church on 14 April 1895 when his father's occupation - he was probably at Neston Colliery - was a labourer.

In 1901 the family was living on Liverpool Road, Neston:

Joseph Medcalfe	Head	M.	45	Coal Miner ^{Hewer}	Worker	Flint - M. Wales
Ann do	Wife	M.	44			Parkgate, Cheshire
John do	Son	S.	20	Coal Miner "Drawer"	do	Neston, do
Joseph do	do	S.	17	House Painter's apprentice	do	Neston, do
Margaret do	Daughter		12			do do
Fred do	Son		10	Scholar		do do
Albert do	do		8	do		do do
Robert do	do		6	do		do do

1901 census (extract) – Liverpool Road, Neston

Joseph Medcalfe	45	coal miner (hewer)	born Flint
Ann	44		born Parkgate
John	20	coal miner (hewer)	born Neston
Joseph	17	house painter's apprentice	born Neston
Margaret	12		born Neston
Fred	10		born Neston
Albert	8		born Neston
Robert	6		born Neston

By 1898 Joseph and Ann had produced ten children although their last two children, James Richard Medcalfe and William Thomas Medcalfe, had both died as infants. Ann Medcalfe (recorded as Metcalfe, Liverpool Road), Robert's mother, died aged 52 on 24 February 1909 and was buried on 27 February 1909.

Elizabeth *Medcalf* (born 8 June 1878, baptised 11 August 1878), the eldest child of Joseph and Ann, had married coal miner Robert Peers (born 21 June 1880) in the 3rd quarter of 1898, at Our Lady & St Nicholas & St Anne, the Liverpool Parish Church, and was living on Brook Street at the time of the 1901 census. Robert was 20 and Elizabeth was 22 in the census and the couple had no living children - their first child, Annie, had been buried on 11 August 1900 aged 17 months (baptised 9 April 1899). By the time of the 1911 census, and now married for 12 years, they had moved to Poplar Weint and Robert (30) was recorded as being a collier's drawer (loader). They now had three sons and one daughter.

In the 1939 Register Robert, Elizabeth and family were living at 20 Mayfield Gardens off Liverpool Road, Neston. Robert was then a builder's labourer and their unmarried children were:

Thomas	born 14 November 1909, a farm labourer. Thomas may have married later in life. It is not known when he died.
Kate	born 4 April 1920. Kate married Denis McConville at a Civil Marriage on Wirral on 29 December 1947 and it is believed that they had two children, John D (mid-1950) and Keith T (mid-1954). It is believed that Denis McConville died, aged 47, in mid-1961.

Also with them in 1939 was Mary J. Williams (born 13 September 1916), a married daughter. Mary had married William E Williams on Wirral in mid-1938.

Elizabeth Peers died 2 February 1945 aged 66 and Robert died 27 September 1963 aged 83. They are buried at Neston Cemetery.

John *Metcalfe*, Robert's eldest brother, married Alice Birch (born 6 May 1890) at Our Lady & St Nicholas & St Anne, the Liverpool Parish Church, on 1 January 1910. Alice was the daughter of journeyman blacksmith Frederick and Ann Birch who, in 1901, were living on Raby Road. At the time of the 1911 census John (30, plasterer's labourer) and Alice (22) were living on Raby Road; they had no children but Mary Jane Medcalfe (25, no occupation recorded), John and Robert's sister, was in the same house; this may have been immediately prior to her marriage. It is believed that John and Alice had six children between 1911 and 1917.

John Medcalfe, a miner, joined the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), the air arm of the British Army, on 15 December 1917. The RFC merged with the Royal Naval Air Service on 1 April 1918 to form the Royal Air Force and John continued his service until his discharge on 14 December 1918. John Medcalfe died on Wirral, aged 50, in late 1931.

In September 1939 Alice Medcalfe was living on Raby Road, with two of her children:

Edna M. Medcalfe born 20 October 1919, single, general domestic servant. It is believed that Edna remained unmarried but it is not known when she died.

Alice Roberts born 28 August 1915. Alice married Leonard Pretoria Roberts (born 10 June 1900) at Neston Parish Church in April / June 1939 and they seem to have had three children (one line of the Register entry is redacted): John B (born July / September 1939) ; Dennis M (born July / September 1940) ; Leonard R (born late 1941). Alice died on Wirral in late 1957 and Leonard P Roberts died in the Chester area in mid-1959, aged 59.

By the time of the 1911 census Robert was living with his widowed father Joseph and his unmarried brothers on Raby Road, Neston:

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.	
1	Joseph Medcalfe	Head	56	-	Widower	33	10	4	3	Bricksetter's labourer	330	Single	Widow	Neston Cheshire	-	-
2	Fred Medcalfe	Son	20	-	Single	-	-	-	-	Plasterer's labourer	230	Do	Widow	Neston Cheshire	-	-
3	Albert Medcalfe	Son	18	-	Single	-	-	-	-	General labourer	330	-	-	Neston Cheshire	-	-
4	Robert Medcalfe	Son	16	-	Single	-	-	-	-	General labourer	330	-	-	Neston Cheshire	-	-
5	John Campion	Brother-in-law	54	-	Single	-	-	-	-	Bricksetter's labourer	330	Do	Widow	Neston Cheshire	-	-

(To be filled up by the Enumerator.)

I certify that:-
 (1) All the ages on this Schedule are entered in the proper sex column.
 (2) I have counted the males and females in Columns 3 and 4 separately, and have compared their sum with the total number of persons.
 (3) After making the necessary inquiries I have completed all entries on the Schedule which appeared to be defective, and have corrected such as appeared to be erroneous.

Total	
Males	Females
5	5

Initials of Enumerator: *WMS*

(To be filled up by, or on behalf of, the Head of Family or other person in occupation, or in charge, of this dwelling.)

Write below the Number of Rooms in this Dwelling (House, Tenement, or Apartment). Count the kitchen as a room but do not count outhouse, landing, lobby, closet, bathroom; nor warehouse, office, shop.

4 Rooms

I declare that this Schedule is correctly filled up to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Signature: *Joseph Medcalfe*

Postal Address: *Raby Road Neston Cheshire*

1911 census (condensed) – Raby Road, Neston

Joseph Medcalfe	56	widower, bricksetter's labourer	born Neston
Fred	20	plasterer's labourer	born Neston
Albert	18	general labourer	born Neston
Robert	16	general labourer	born Neston
John Campion	57	brother-in-law, bricksetter's labourer	born Neston

Joseph Medcalfe has recorded that he was married for 33 years with 7 of his 10 children surviving. Although he states that he was born in Neston, Joseph's actual birthplace was Flint.

Robert Medcalfe's Service Records show that he enlisted at Birkenhead on 21 August 1914 (the same day as William Lewis), that he was a labourer, 5ft 6¼ins tall, weighed 130lb (9 stone 4lb /59kg), had a fresh complexion, grey eyes, dark brown eyes and a 35½-inch expanded chest. Two versions of his Attestation papers exist, one stating that he was 20 years 180 days old and the other showing 19 years 182 days. As, undoubtedly, his birth took place in March/April 1895 he would have been 19½ when he enlisted. On the same day that Robert enlisted in Birkenhead he joined the 8th Battalion Cheshire Regiment in Chester.

The 8th (Service) Battalion was formed at Chester on 12 August 1914 as part of Kitchener's New Army and came under the orders of the 40th Brigade, 13th (Western) Division. The battalion moved to Tidworth Garrison on the Wiltshire/Hampshire border but by October 1914 was at Chiseldon army camp in Wiltshire. In February 1915 the battalion moved to Pirbright, near Guildford (Surrey) and it was here that Robert faced two charges of being absent without leave:

17 April 1915 - overstaying his pass from midnight until 10.15am 20 April (58¼ hours) - confined to barracks for 5 days

30 April 1915 - absent from band practice - confined to barracks for 2 days [it is known that Robert was a drummer]

Although some of Robert Medcalfe's records were lost, it was also noted (October 1915) that he had been reported on several occasions for drunkenness.

On 26 June 1915 the 8th Battalion embarked, as part of the MEF (Mediterranean Expeditionary Force) under the command of the Hon. Heathcote Drummond Willoughby for Egypt and thence to Gallipoli.

The journey to Gallipoli, via Alexandria, took around three weeks and the troops were landed at Cape Helles, the rocky headland at the south-western tip of the Gallipoli peninsula where the 8th Battalion occupied 'V' beach. Little appears to have happened for around four weeks until The Battle of Sari Bair (6 -10 August 1915); the 40th Brigade had been broken up and the 8th Battalion was now attached to the Light Horse Brigades of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. (ANZAC) but the Cheshire's seemed to have little role other than digging and holding trenches. Sari Bair was part of the 'August Offensive', the final attempt by the British and Commonwealth troops to seize control of the Gallipoli peninsula from the Ottoman Empire. The 8th Battalion then became part of the 13th Division and moved around 5 miles to Suvla where amphibious landings were intended to support a breakout from the Anzac sector. Despite facing only light opposition, the landings at Suvla Bay were mismanaged and the same stalemate conditions that prevailed on the Anzac and Helles fronts were reached. On 15 August, after a week of indecision and inactivity, the elderly and inexperienced British commander at Suvla, Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Stopford was dismissed; it was considered that his performance in command was one of the most incompetent feats of generalship of the First World War.

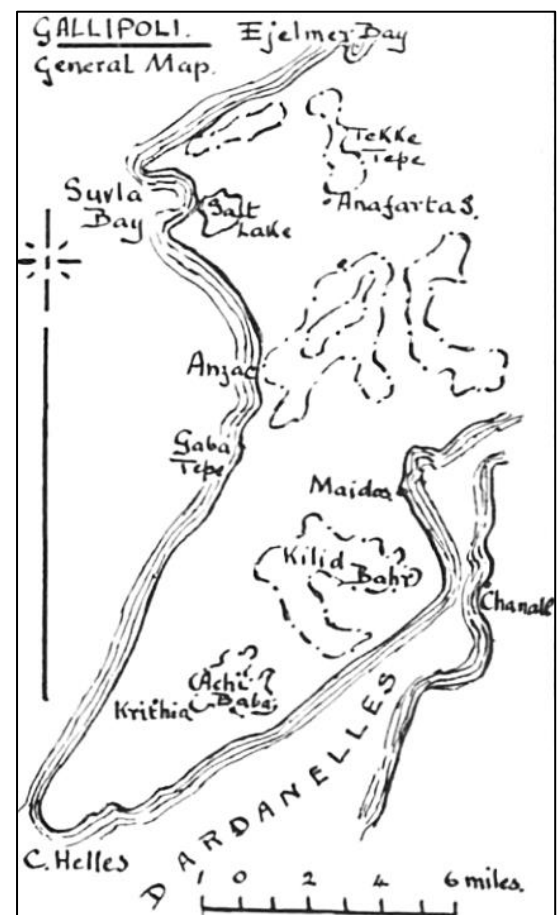
Fighting climaxed on 21 August with The Battle of Scimitar Hill, the largest battle of the Gallipoli campaign, but when this failed to gain its objectives activity around Suvla subsided into sporadic fighting until it was evacuated by the British in late December 1915. Confidence in the Gallipoli operation in London and Paris was dwindling at this time and insufficient troops were promised despite the attempts of former First Lord of the Admiralty and architect of the operation, Winston Churchill. Initially, it was recommended that evacuation would take place on 15 November 1915 but the British government, having prevaricated for several weeks, finally sanctioned an evacuation on 7 December. Unfortunately by this stage a heavy blizzard had set in making such an operation hazardous:

The storm was very violent. During it, a relief was taking place. Next morning the plain was covered with dead, dying and half-frozen men of the relieving Brigade. Dry nullahs became swift torrents, down which poured through our lines dead Turks and a considerable quantity of Turkish war material. Our casualties were very heavy and provided an opportunity of getting rid of a number of men under peace conditions....At 4.15am, General Maude, who commanded the 13th Division, with General Marshall who was in charge of the embarkation arrangements and his GSO (Crookenden), came to the pier head to satisfy himself that all his men were safe. The rear guard, men of the 8th Battalion, stood on the cliff above the pier. After making his GSC (Hildyard) inspect the men with a torch to see if they all had got their packs on, Maude told the officer to count the men. He reported thirty-nine, but added that all were present. The correct number was forty, so Maude told him to count again. He produced the same result. The party would never have got away at all if an exasperated voice had not called out from the dark, "The fellow isn't counting himself".

[The History of the Cheshire Regiment in the Great War, 1914-1918 : Vol. 1 A. Crookenden, Colonel of The Regiment W.H. Evans, Sons & Co. Ltd. (1938)]

However, the night-time evacuation of 105,000 men and 300 guns from Anzac Cove and Suvla Bay was successfully conducted from 10 - 20 December 1915 and the evacuation of Helles was conducted (35,000 men) from late December until 9 January 1916. Casualty levels were significantly lower than had been predicted - official figures quote just three casualties.

Although Robert Medcalfe would have been involved in all the Gallipoli conflicts and excavation, he appears to have come through unscathed and it looks as if he was in Port Said, Egypt, on 5 February 1916. This would have been the port for troop embarkation to the conflict zone around the Persian (Arabian) Gulf and it seems that Robert embarked in Egypt on 14 February, disembarking in Basra (now Iraq) on 28 February 1916, led by Captain F H C Wilcox.



The history of the 13th Division, which included the 8th Battalion Cheshire Regiment, around this time notes that

After a brief refit in Egypt where the Division's battalions were being brought back up to strength, the Division was dispatched to Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq), as reinforcements for Anglo-Indian forces attempting to relief the siege of Kut. It took until the end of March for the entire division to make the journey from Egypt to Basra and then from Basra up to the Tigris to join the rest of the Tigris Corps.

Once in theatre, the 13th Division discovered that the logistical situation in Mesopotamia was a mess. The port facilities at Basra were inadequate. Lacking good roads or a railway, virtually everything travelled by river. However, there were insufficient numbers of boats to keep the Anglo-Indian force which the 13th Division was joining adequately supplied. However, what the 13th Division did bring with it was the modern, heavy artillery, including howitzers.

The 13th Division, as the strongest unit available, became the spearhead the Tigris Corps' attempt to relieve the Kut garrison beginning on 6 April 1916. The division fought at Hanna, Fallahiya, and Sanniyat. After taking the first two, the 13th Division was stopped by the Turkish forces under the overall command of Khalil Pasha at the Battle of the Sanniyat on 9 April 1916. During the fighting 5–9 April 1916, four of the 13th Division's soldiers were awarded the Victoria Cross.....In three days of battle, the division was reduced to 5328 effectives. [Source: Wikipedia]

The action in which Robert Medcalfe was wounded and died, is most clearly described by Arthur Crookenden:

Men who had landed at Suvla were veterans by now and few of them were left in the ranks. The Battalion had been filled up with drafts, many of whom were now seasoned and bronzed, but they had very little training and there was a pronounced shortage of young officers and of experienced non-commissioned officers. Of the officers who had been with the Battalion in August only three arrived in Basra....The 8th Battalion arrived in Mesopotamia, or Mespot as they called it, at a moment when hope of relieving the garrison besieged in Kut was almost gone. The great attack on the Dujaila (or Es Sinn) position had failed through too rigid adherence to the plan of attack, itself open to criticism on the ground of rigidity and over-caution on an occasion when it would have been justifiable to take a risk. This failure was one of a series of reverses, the like of which the British Army had never before experienced. But as long as any smallest chance of relieving Kut remained, it had to be tried. The 8th Battalion spent a month training under Colonel W.W.B. Gover, a regular officer of The Regiment.

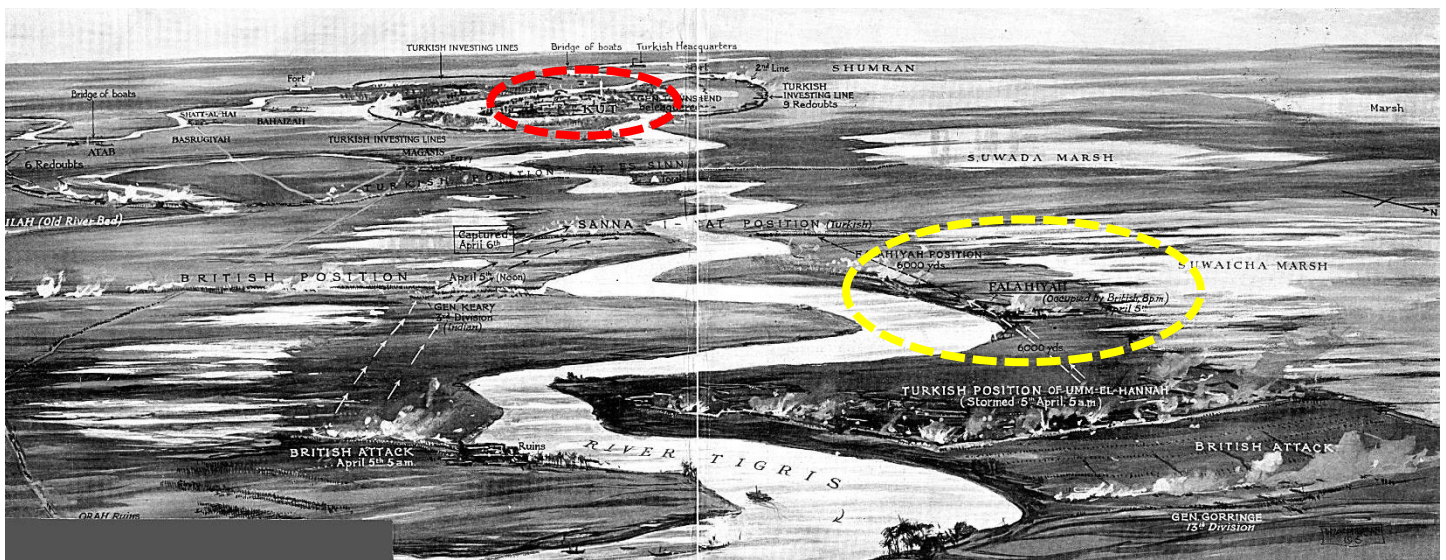
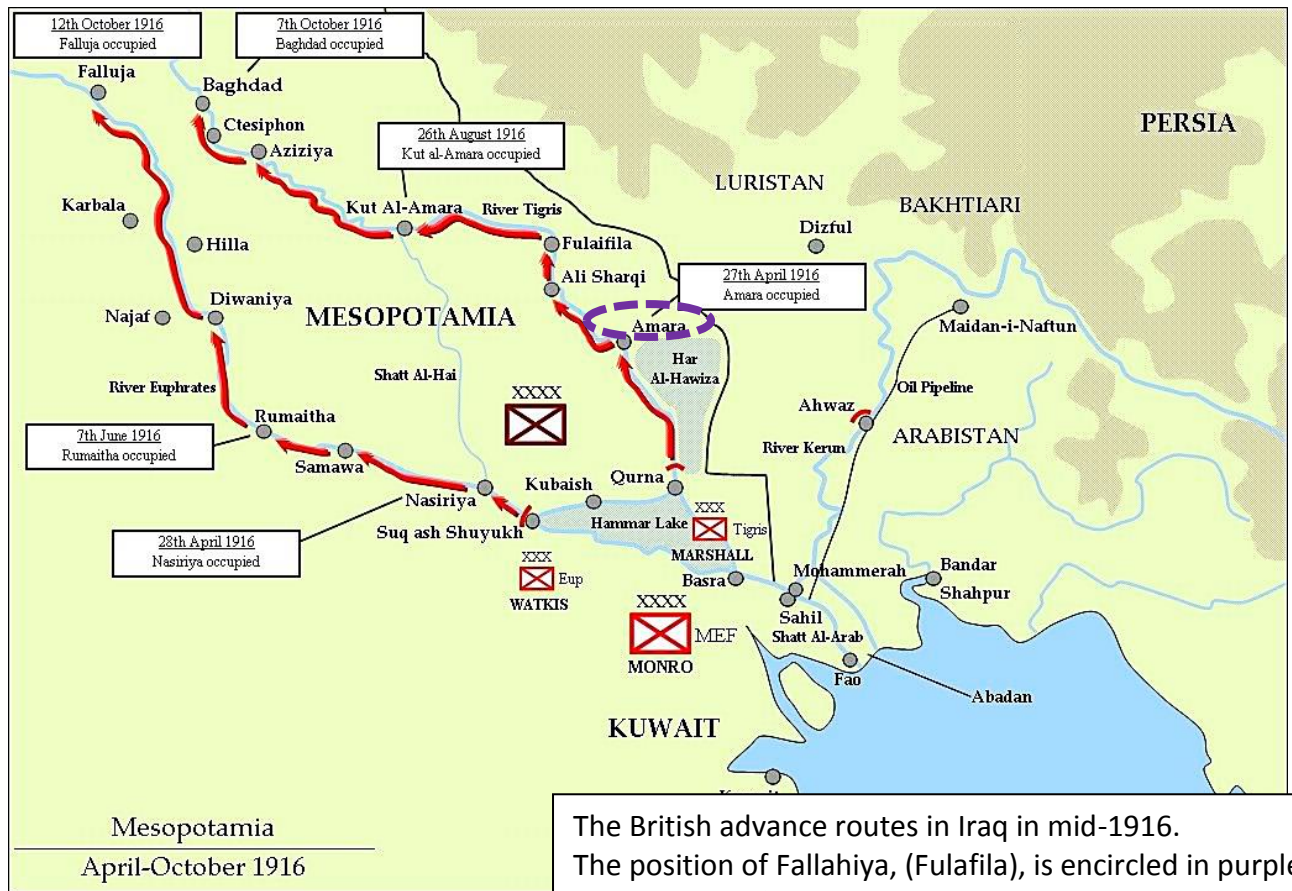
Action of Fallahiya

It was decided to make the next effort on the northern, or left bank of the Tigris....The first Turkish position, and apparently the only one on this side, was that at El Hanna.

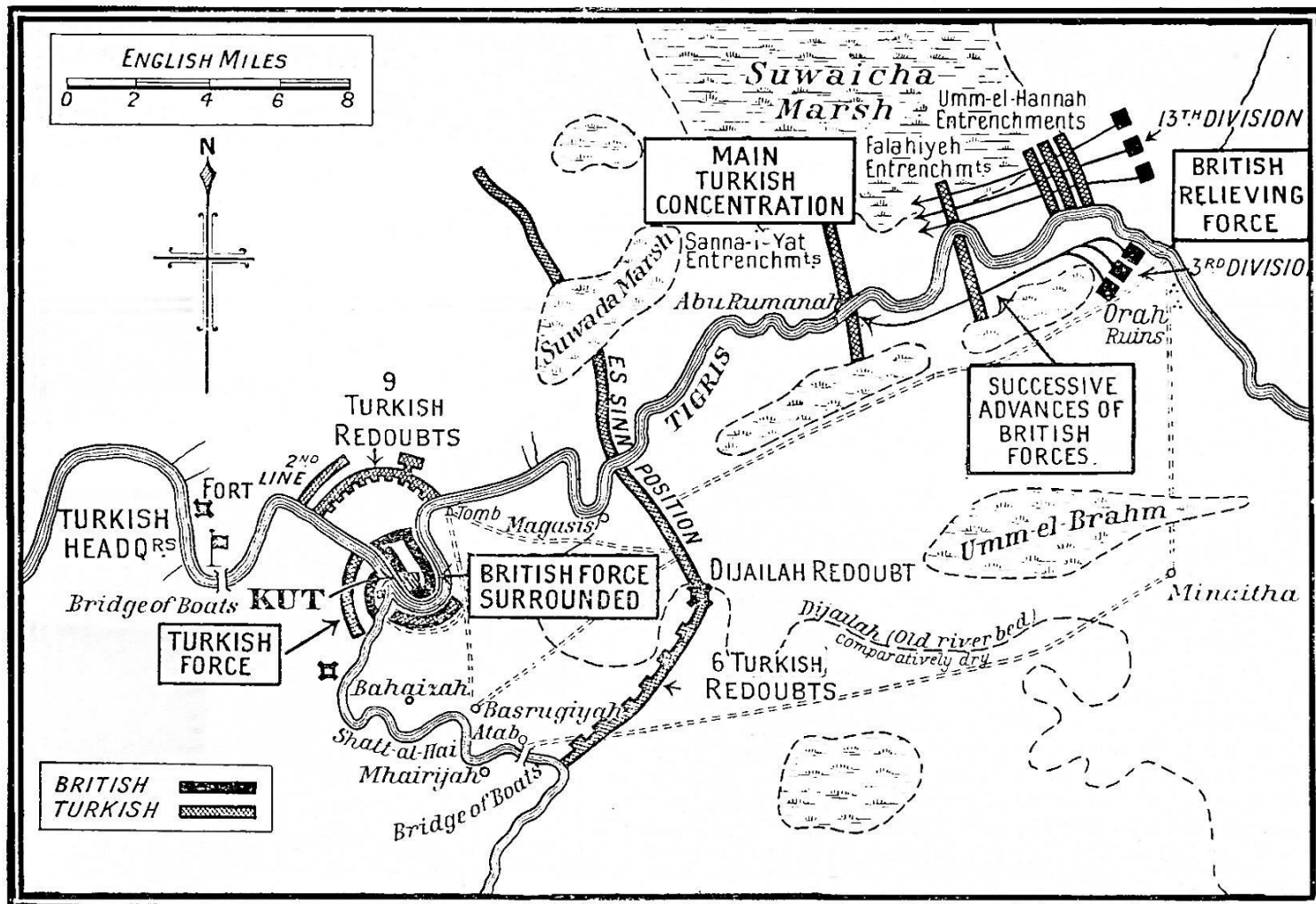
Saps had been dug to within fifty yards of the enemy's wire, ample artillery was available, and were able to bring fire to bear on the Turks from both flanks. The 13th Division had rehearsed the attack, during its month's training, over full scale dummy trenches. Every battalion, every company, knew its task thoroughly.

On the 5th April, the 8th Battalion passed through the leading Brigade to the attack of the 3rd Turkish line. But the Turks had gone and the Battalion found itself advanced guard to the Division moving into the 'blue'. Nothing could be seen of the enemy but gradually fire was felt on the left flank, and Colonel Gover changed direction in this direction, the Battalion covering a front of some 2000 yards. After moving forward some 300 yards, the enemy fire became heavier, and after advancing a

further 300 yards by short rushes, the Battalion halted and dug in. They were quite unsupported. Here they remained till dark, when they were relieved by the 38th and 39th Brigades. Our losses were Captain H. Delves Broughton, Captain C. W. Boote killed, seven officers wounded, 28 men killed, 170 wounded and seven missing. After a bombardment, the 38th and 39th Brigades made a night attack, which was successful.

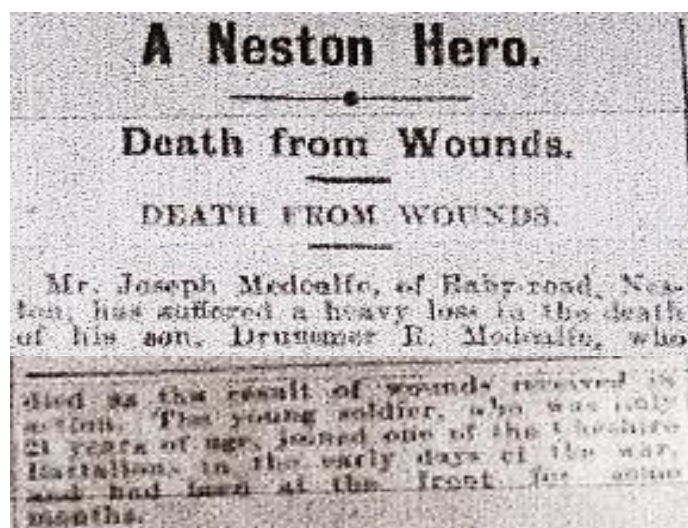


A diorama, showing an elevated view south-westwards along the Tigris and swampy floodplain towards Kut-el-Amara (encircled in red). At Fallahiya (Falahiyyah, encircled in yellow) the front line was barely 1000 yards wide being restricted by the river and the Suwaicha Marsh to the north. [Source: <https://norfolkworldwar1.org/2016/04/29/the-2nd-battalion-of-the-norfolk-regiment-in-mesopotamia-april-1916/>]



British operations on the north bank of the Tigris, April 1916. The 13th Division, which included the 8th Battalion Cheshire Regiment, advanced towards Kut through the swampy lowlands of the river's extensive floodplain. The abandoned entrenchments of Umm-el-Hannah (El Hanna) recorded in Crookenden's account are in the NE sector of this map, east of the Fallahiya entrenchments. [Source: <https://norfolkinworldwar1.org/2016/04/29/the-2nd-battalion-of-the-norfolk-regiment-in-mesopotamia-april-1916/>]

It was towards the close of the conflict at Fallahiya that Robert was wounded and taken to the 16th Casualty Clearing Station at El Orah (just south of the river) where he died. His record shows that he had served for 1 year 231 days.



Birkenhead News – April 1916

Transcription:

A Neston Hero

Death from Wounds

Mr Joseph Medcalfe, of Raby-road, Neston, has suffered a heavy loss in the death of his son, Drummer R. Medcalfe, who died as the result of wounds received in action. The young soldier, who was only 21 years of age, joined one of the Cheshire Battalions in the early days of the war and had been at the front for some months.



British troops, possibly from the 13th Division, on the march in Mesopotamia. In February 1916, the division was sent to Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) to reinforce the Tigris Corps. This picture may date to 1917.
[Source: Wikipedia]

NESTON.

DIED OF WOUNDS.—It was with deep regret that Neston people heard on Tuesday that the relatives of Robert Medcalfe, a native of Neston, aged 21 years, had received a message from the War Office stating that "he had died from wounds received in action." He was very well-known locally and respected; he had always taken a keen interest in all kinds of sport, and was a member of the local quiting team, and as a boy for years was a member of the Neston Boy Scouts, and later of the Boys' Brigade. Much sympathy is felt with his father, and brothers, and sisters. Only a fortnight ago they received picture postcards from Egypt, where the 8th Cheshires, the regiment to which he belonged, is at present stationed, and these cards had brought

cheery messages, and stated that he was in the best of health. His father is recovering from an illness, and was worrying very much about him. No particulars are as yet known as to the war in which he had received his wounds, and his family anxiously await further particulars from his officers. It is doubly sad for the family, as only a few days ago they received news that a sister-in-law had died in Canada, where she and her husband worked on a large farm, as a result of an accident when lighting a stove preparing for a dance for the farm employees. She accidentally set fire to a can of oil, which burst and set her clothing on fire, and she died as a result of the burns and shock.

Chester Chronicle - Saturday 22 April 1916

B/11205 Che. I hereby acknowledge the receipt of the
British War Medal.
granted in respect of the service of No 11383.
R. Medcalfe, "The Cheshire Regiment".
Date
Mr J. Medcalfe, Signature Joseph Medcalfe.
Liverpool Road.
Neston Che.

Birkenhead News –
Saturday 1 March 1919

—Jim.
MEDCALFE—In loving memory of our dear Mother, ANN MEDCALFE, beloved wife of Joseph Medcalfe, of Neston, who died Feb. 24, 1909; also of our dear brother ROBERT (Bob), who died of wounds received in action in Mesopotamia, April 8, 1916, aged 21 years.—Fondly remembered by her loving daughters Lizzie, Jennie and Maggie.

In June 1919 Joseph Metcalfe received Robert's unpaid credit - essentially the balance of pay of his wages – of £7 10s 9d (and a smaller payment of 1s 4d) together with a War Gratuity of £7. This total, £14 12s 1d, is approximately equivalent to a *labour value* (wages) of about £1950 in 2016.

The War Gratuity, calculated on a sliding scale and related to the date of enlistment, was introduced in December 1918 as a payment to be made to those men (or their relatives) who had served in WW1 for a period of 6 months or more home service or for any length of service if a man had served overseas. The rules governing the gratuity were implemented under Army Order 17 of 1919. Many soldiers decided to accept a £1 deduction in their War Gratuity so they could keep their military greatcoats as they were made of good quality material.

Name.		Corps.	Rank	Regt. No.
<i>METCALF Robert</i>		<i>Ches R</i>	<i>Pvt</i>	<i>11383</i>
		<i>-11-</i>	<i>- -</i>	<i>- -</i>
Medal.	Roll.	Page.	Remarks.	
VICTORY	<i>J/2/101 A/5</i>	<i>1258</i>	<i>D/W 8/4/16.</i>	
BRITISH	<i>A/-</i>	<i>76</i>		
<i>15</i> STAR	<i>g/2/1133</i>	<i>395</i>		
Theatre of War first served in <i>(213) Balkans</i>				
Date of entry therein <i>26/6/15</i>				

K 1380.



British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920

Birkenhead News – April 1916

Joseph and Ann had ten children and details of Elizabeth and John have been given previously. Details known of the other children are

Joseph	baptised 24 August 1883	buried, aged 25, 15 April 1909.
Mary Jane	baptised 27 November 1885	it is believed that Mary married postman Thomas Christopher of Raby at a Civil Marriage on Wirral in April / June 1911.
Margaret Ellen	baptised 13 May 1888	nothing known beyond 1901.
Fred	baptised 10 October 1890	it is believed that Fred married Mary Elizabeth Wheeler of Neston in April / June 1915 at Christ Church, Ellesmere Port. Mary was the daughter of colliery stationary engine driver William and Elizabeth Wheeler of Gladstone Road, Neston. No children are known. Fred died, aged 63, in early 1954.
Albert	baptised 12 February 1893	believed to have married Emma Holmes at Holy Trinity Church, Hoylake, in late 1913. Emma may have been the daughter of jobbing gardener Richard and Margaret Holmes of Hoylake. It is believed that Albert and Emma had six children and that Albert died in Wallasey in early 1964 aged 71.
Robert		The subject of this account, Robert died of wounds in Iraq, 8 April 1916.
James Richard	baptised 13 December 1896	buried 6 September 1897, aged 9 months.
William Thomas	baptised 20 May 1898	buried 14 September 1899, aged 16 months.

Joseph Medcalfe, Robert's father, died in Neston in early 1937 aged 80. He had outlived his wife and at least five of his children.

Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

I shot him dead because -
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although
He thought he'd list, perhaps,
Off-hand like - just as I -
Was out of work - had sold his traps -
No other reason why.

Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat, if met where any bar is,
Or help to half a crown.



"The Man he Killed"
Thomas Hardy
(1840 - 1928)

