

Captain Arthur Webber

This year marks the centenary of the Battle of Gallipoli, the ill-fated and strategically flawed attempt to defeat the Ottoman Empire through combined naval and military operations in the Dardanelles. Within this broad sweep of history emerges a story of particular local interest concerning a former resident of the village, Arthur Webber.

Second son of George and Charlotte Webber, he was born at Little Sarratt Hall, his parent's home on 6 December 1868. His father was listed as a gentleman, deriving income from land, rents and shares. Arthur's upbringing was typical, being sent to boarding school before training as a solicitor's clerk in Watford. In 1885 his father died, but his mother continued to reside in Sarratt and manage their estates. Before the close of the next decade however, events in a distant colony of Empire would forever change the course of his life.

In October 1899 simmering tension in South Africa broke out into the 2nd Anglo-Boer War, pitting the British Army against the Dutch Boer settlers. Arthur became

motivated to join up and on 27 February 1900 he received a commission in 3rd (Militia) battalion, the Connaught Rangers. Soon sent to South Africa, he was attached to the 2nd Mounted Infantry and served on operations in the Orange Free State and Transvaal, combating the highly mobile irregular Boer units.

Finishing the conflict as a Captain in 1902, he returned to civilian life, taking up farming, assisting his ailing mother in running the family estates in Sarratt. Events overseas during the summer of 1914 however, again intervened in Arthur's life. The Army faced a difficult reality. Though experienced and highly-trained, it required rapid expansion of manpower in order to challenge the large conscript armies of the Central Powers. In this environment, experience was at a premium and thus, despite being at the relatively advanced age of forty-five, Webber immediately rejoined as a Captain. He was posted to the newly formed 5th Connaught Rangers in Dublin and appointed to command D Company.

Gallipoli

After a long period training his battalion, along with the rest of 10th (Irish) Division, he embarked for the Dardanelles, arriving at Suvla Bay on 6 August 1915. Following initial British landings there, the offensive stalled and Arthur and his company rotated through periods of holding the forward trenches. This task was made particularly onerous by severe water shortages and dysentery that prevailed on the Peninsula.

On 21 August the British effort was renewed and the Connaughts were directed to attack the Turkish held Hill 60, a feature of dominating ground. Arthur led his men into the attack, following closely behind C Company. His Commanding Officer

recalled, *'They were admirably led and great dash was shown by both these companies.'* They succeeded in clearing the lower slopes of the hill, and captured the wells at Kabak Kuyu, but failed to secure its summit and at a heavy cost to the Rangers. On 27 August, now severely depleted in numbers, the battalion again attacked. Arthur, though sick with dysentery, was placed in command of the reserve of 50 men. After a heavy artillery bombardment, the initial assaulting parties broke into the Turkish position. At 18.15hr Webber was called to reinforce the forward troops. Company Sergeant Major John McIlwaine recalled, *'Capt. Webber takes up us... to occupy the position. At bifurcation of trenches the Captain goes north and sends me to command right and occupy where practicable. I did not see him again. The dead being quite to the parapet I take my party over the top in rear and with about 20 men occupy trench... Not long there when Turks bomb us from front and left flank'*

Here, on the slopes of Hill 60, Webber was severely wounded during a determined Turkish counterattack. He recalled *'a bomb exploded near me and blew off the first finger of my left hand. I received a gun shot wound in the left shoulder ... [and] was shot clean through the neck and the vein was severed and I became unconscious from loss of blood.'* One of 154 casualties the Connaughts sustained, Arthur's part was over and he was evacuated. The Irishmen were gradually forced back, consolidating their position in the former Turkish frontline. This was the battalion's last major action on the Peninsula and during three weeks of fighting its strength was reduced from 29 officers and 945 soldiers to 5 and 180 respectively.

Webber meanwhile, was evacuated via hospital ship and spent a period convalescing. It became clear however, that his wounds were more than physical. His medical report lists symptoms that indicate Arthur was suffering relatively severely from shell shock. Returning to duty, but on account of his health and age, he was sent to India in 1916 to join a second-line garrison battalion on internal policing. He remained here for the rest of the war before being invalided out in 1919 on account of his continued condition.

After Arthur returned to Sarratt, his mother died in 1921 and he moved to Leverstock Green Farm nearby. He stayed locally and died in Watford in February 1952. It can only be hoped that he finally found a measure of peace and satisfaction in this remaining time.

Thus, on Armistice day as we remember those who fell, let us also recall men from our village like Arthur, who served, bore hardship and faced constant and mortal danger by following the path of duty, only to bear the burden of their experiences for the rest of their lives.

AWG Edmund



THE 5th CONNAUGHT RANGERS IN LANCASHIRE TRENCH.