

cold, dwindling supplies, sickness – and four attempts that winter by British troops to confront and surround the enemy failed and led to 23,000 casualties. When the garrison surrendered on 29th



British troops on the banks of the Tigris in Jan 1916 during the siege of Kut al-Amara

Saturday 10th February 1917. He was 22 years old. In all, there were 38,842 British military deaths in the Mesopotamian Campaign including 28,578 from sickness and other non-

April 1916, the men were taken prisoner and it was described as “the most abject capitulation in Britain’s military history.” Nearly 70% of these men subsequently died of malnutrition while in captivity.

After Kut fell, the British force in Mesopotamia was put under the command of Sir Frederick Maude and was built up and re-organised. By October 1916, Maude had 150,000 troops under his command, and was determined to launch a renewed offensive against Kut before the arrival of the winter floods.

The Division with which James was serving took part in the battle to retake Kut. The British attack was eventually launched on the night of 13th December 1916 and involved 50,000 men. The British advanced up both sides of the Tigris river, forcing the Ottoman army out of a number of fortified positions along the way. Progress was slow and it took a full two months before Kut was retaken on 24th February 1917. By this time, young James Martin was dead – killed in action on

battle causes.

James was buried at the Amara War Cemetery on the banks of the River Tigris. Sadly, since the Iraq War, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission has been unable to maintain Iraqi cemeteries and memorials, and there were fears that the Amara cemetery had been destroyed. Recent reports suggest that it has been protected on a voluntary basis by its Iraqi keeper, but sadly James’s last resting place is still a long way from his Rodley roots.



Amara War Cemetery

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Westbury Remembers - Part 13

James Martin

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and sponsored by

Westbury-on-Severn Parish Council



James Martin was born in Westbury on 8th April 1895 and was a truly local lad. His grandparents had lived somewhere called Cripple Castle, which I believe is on the hill in Bollow and now known as Bransdon Cottage. His grandfather, also called James, was a farm labourer, and his grandmother, Sarah, a washerwoman. They had three sons. Their middle son, William, started work as a servant for Robert and Emma Butler of Rodley Court Farm. He later became an agricultural labourer and in 1893 married Margaret Freeman from Minsterworth.

They had two sons, Gilbert and James, but in 1898, when James was only three, the boys were left fatherless when William died at the age of 32 years. A year later, when James started school at Walmore Hill, his mother was living at the Blue Boy Inn in Rodley, which was run by Eliza Butler. The inn relied for its trade on the Framilode Passage and the nearby Green, a popular mooring-place for boats. The Butler family

had also occupied Hill Farm in Rodley and it was Eliza Butler who donated the land on which Rodley Chapel now stands.

James’s mother married again two years later, and her new 21 year old husband, Henry Fisher, became stepfather to James and his older brother, Gilbert. By the time of the 1901 census the family were living in Rodley together with their new baby, Charles.



The Blue Boy and the Green

Over the next ten years, they had four more children but in the meantime, James had completed his education at Walmore Hill School and was shown on the 1911 census as working and ‘living in’ as a ‘house domestic’ for Eliza Butler. James’s brother, Gilbert, was living and working at the Blue Boy too, and their younger half-brother, Charles, appears to have also been staying there as a visitor.

James’s service record has not survived so it is unclear when he enlisted, but he joined the 7th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment, which was formed in Bristol in August 1914. The battalion had periods of training in England before sailing

from Avonmouth in June 1915 for Alexandria. By July they were at Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos, preparing for a landing at Cape Helles on the southernmost tip of Gallipoli. What happened next is unclear, for a short while later they had returned to Mudros, before eventually landing with the entire division at Anzac Cove at the beginning of August.

For over three months the Anzac beachhead had been a stalemate and

James's battalion was soon in action in the Battle of Sari Bair, which was intended to break through by capturing the high ground and linking up with the force which had landed at Suvla to the north. It is easy to forget

that Gallipoli was by no means purely an ANZAC battleground and that the British and French army contingents on Gallipoli outnumbered the ANZACs both in numbers of men deployed and in casualties.

The 7th Glosters were sent to support the New Zealand Infantry Brigade when it made its decisive assault on Chunuk Bair, one of the three high points on the Sari Bair range. The attack, which had been planned to take place before dawn on 7th August, had fallen behind schedule and the Auckland Battal-

ion, which in the mid-morning was leading the attack, suffered heavy casualties. When ordered to continue the attack, the New Zealand commander refused to sacrifice his men and insisted that the attack be mounted that night instead. In the pre-dawn darkness of 8th August, the New Zealanders and the British supporting troops reached the summit and were engaged in a desperate struggle to hold off the Turks.



The Chunuk Bair assault

The failure of the August attacks and the high casualty rates from sickness, meant that by December 1915, the Allied forces on Gallipoli were growing ever weaker. Political pressure and the need for

reserves on the Western Front led to the decision to evacuate the peninsula.

Many were evacuated from Suvla Bay and Anzac Cove on the night of 19th-20th December but it seems that by this time, James's battalion had been moved to the Helles bridgehead in the south. Here they were in action during the last Turkish attacks on the 7th January 1916 before they, too, were evacuated, bringing the three-week evacuation and the Gallipoli campaign to a close. In just over a week 35,000 soldiers,

3,689 horses and mules, 127 guns, 328 vehicles, and 1,600 tons of stores had been taken off Helles. The operation was carried out with almost no casualties, the rearguard burning the stores and equipment that could not be taken with them.

One of those evacuated wrote: "I could not admit, even to myself, that we had been beaten, after the sacrifice of so many men ... to desert our fallen comrades and sneak away in the dark without a fight is a revolting thing and the thought of it nauseates me."

On leaving Gallipoli, James's Division landed at Port Said and by the end of January was holding forward posts in the Suez Canal defences, so if James joined the army to see the world, he certainly got his wish.

In 1915, the war had spread to Egypt and Palestine, and to the Suez Canal - Britain's all important route to her colonies. The Turks had begun planning to capture the Canal in 1914 but the only possible assault involved a 300 kilometre march across the Sinai Desert. The British were aware of the Turkish plans and the Canal was defended by 30,000 Indian Army troops, an Anglo-French naval squadron and a small air reconnaissance force. Although a Turkish expedition in February 1915 had ended in failure, it had led to inordinate British military

resources being used to protect the Canal against future attacks.

In February 1916, the Division in which James was serving began to move to Mesopotamia to strengthen a force that was being assembled to relieve the besieged British garrison at Kut al Amara in present day Iraq.

When Turkey entered the war in October 1914, Britain immediately opened a new military front in Mesopotamia and British and Indian troops were sent to the Persian Gulf to protect Britain's oil interests. They made rapid progress inland taking Basra and Kurna, and by September 1915 had taken the town of Kut-al-Amara, just 120 miles south of Baghdad. However, in November, everything changed at Ctesiphon, when what had been envisaged as a trouble-free prelude to the final march on Baghdad turned into a bloody affair with more than half of the 8,500 British and Indian troops killed or wounded. The survivors endured a dangerous and exhausting retreat to Kut-al-Amara without proper medical or transport facilities.

On 5th December, the Turkish troops, reinforced with an extra 30,000 men, both Turkish and German, laid siege to Kut-al-Amara - a siege that lasted for 147 days before the 11,800 British and Indian troops finally surrendered. The conditions during the siege were appalling - bitter