

## **Thomas George Irons**

### **Private 9025, 1st Battalion**

### **Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry**

**Thomas George Irons** was a regular soldier. Although his Army Service Record seems not to have survived, it is known that he served in 'C' Company in the 1st Battalion, Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI) and, judging from his service number 9025, he probably enlisted about April 1909 and in High Wycombe. In the 1911 Census Thomas is shown resident with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion at Ahmednagar, India where it had been based since 1903.

Thomas was born on 14 December 1890 in Chiswick, Middlesex and baptised on 1st February 1891 in Turnham Green. His father, George Irons, was a local man but his mother, Louisa (née Turner), was from Amersham. It is not clear how the couple met but they married in Amersham in 1889. In 1891 they were living at 8 Jessops Row, Chiswick, with their newly born son, aged just four months. There were two more sons born in London, William Ernest born in 1892 who died at the young age of seven in 1899, and George born in 1896.

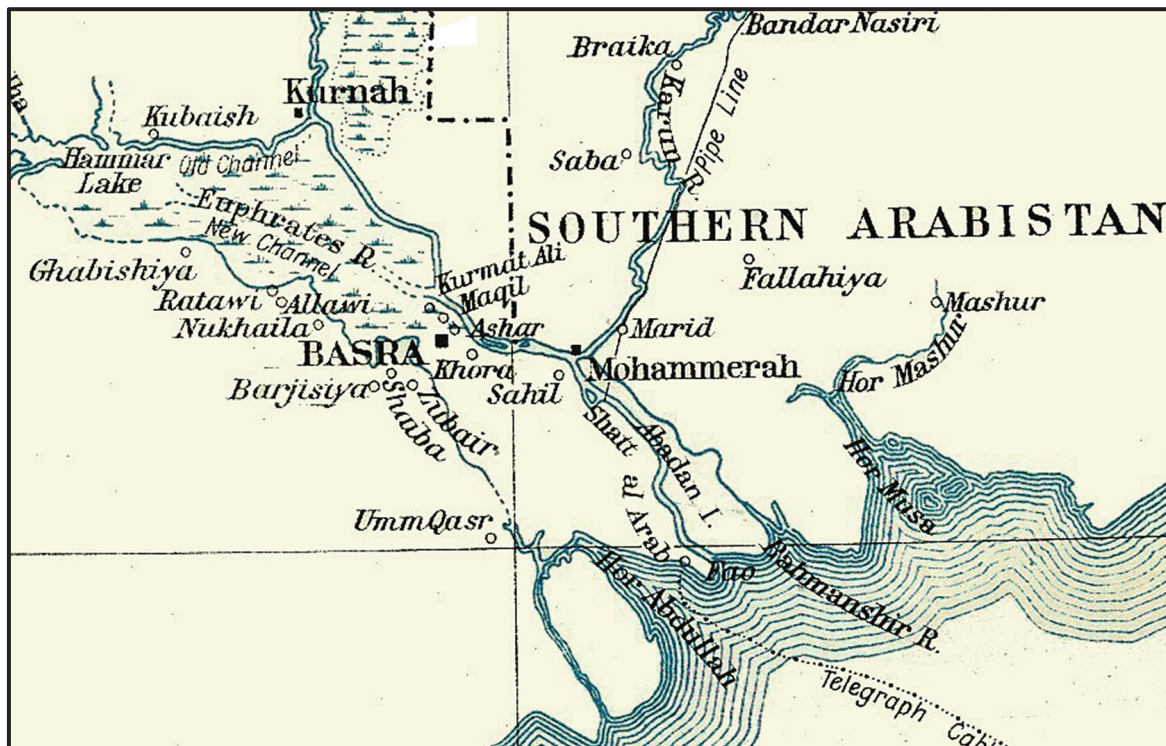
Louisa was widowed with the death of her husband George in early 1900 and was seemingly pregnant with her fourth child at that time. She returned to Amersham, presumably to be close to her own family, and gave birth to another son, Ernest, on the 1 January 1901 registering the event in Amersham. Her two boys, Thomas George and George, were being cared for at that time by her parents in the family home at Woodrow, Amersham. Her father, Thomas Turner, although 73 years of age, showed his occupation in the 1901 Census as ordinary farm labourer and was presumably still working.

In 1903 Louisa married a local man, George James Slade, a widower with two sons. The couple went on to have two daughters and by 1911 the family of two adults and six children were living in Whielden Street, Amersham. Interestingly, George Irons, by then fifteen years old, was shown employed as a golf caddie. Thomas George may have resided with the family briefly but he had probably seen a career in the army as an alternative to life as a labourer and had already made his decision to join up.

Thomas George Irons was the step-brother of **Pte 9029 William John Slade** who also served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion OBLI. It would appear that the two enlisted in High Wycombe at the same time.

The 1st and 2nd Battalions, The Oxfordshire Light Infantry, had been formed on 1 July 1881 from an amalgamation of the 43rd and 52nd Regiments of Foot. In 1908 the regiment's title was changed to become the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI), more generally known as the "Ox and Bucks". The 1st Battalion had been based in India and Ireland and had also seen extensive service in South Africa during the Second Boer War. Returning for a brief period to England, it sailed again for India in 1903 where it remained until the outbreak of World War 1 in 1914.

Britain needed oil to keep its dominant navy at sea and determined to act promptly to protect supplies by occupying the oilfields, tanks and the pipeline of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company at Abadan, close to Basra. The Turks were encouraged by Germany, who had been developing Turkey as an ally for some years, to oppose any such action. The Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force, tasked with the landing at Shat-al-Arab and the seizure of Basra, was created principally from the Indian Army, with the Indian formations containing some British units. The 1st Battalion, OBLI, as part of the 17th Brigade of the 6th (Poona) Division, was one of these units. They were deployed to Mesopotamia leaving their base at Ahmednagar in India by train for Bombay on 17 November 1914. On the 19th they embarked aboard the B.I.M.S. *Thongwa*, finally reaching Camp Maqil, above Basra, on 5 December 1914. This is the date shown on the Medal Record Card for Thomas George Irons on which he enters the Asiatic theatre of war.



Lower Mesopotamia, Courtesy: [www.naval-history.net](http://www.naval-history.net)

The campaign in Lower Mesopotamia had begun in late September and, by the time of Thomas's arrival on the scene, the initial objectives had largely been achieved. Originally, engagement with the Turks was only to be undertaken if they showed signs of hostility. When news came through that Turkey had attacked Russia on the Black Sea coast, then conflict became inevitable and, following several major engagements, the Turks were driven north, Basra was taken and occupied and the invading army was poised to attack Kurnah (Qurna), a city lying at the confluence of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates and the legendary site of the Garden of Eden. After some stiff opposition from Turks who had crossed the Tigris, and aided by vessels of the Royal Navy on the Euphrates that were shelling the town, the infantry managed to encircle Kurnah and the garrison surrendered. 42 Turkish officers and more than 1,000 men were captured. On 9th December 1914 the news of the taking of Kurnah reached the Battalion at Maqil and at the end of the month it was embarked on the SS *Blosse Lynch* to join the forces there.

The actions up to this moment had secured the protection of the oil installations at Basra and, probably buoyed by their early successes, the 6th (Poona) Division began an advance further upriver. The apparent ultimate, but as yet unspoken, objective was the taking of Baghdad.

The terrain presented enormous difficulties in the movement of materials and supplies and transport of these was almost exclusively by river. It should have been obvious, even to the untrained mind, that this problem would be compounded for an army stretching its supply lines over five hundred blistering miles from its base at Basra. This, plus apparent complacency following the comparative ease with which earlier objectives had been achieved and together with an underestimation of the fighting spirit and determination of the Turkish forces, was ultimately to lead to disaster.

In late May 1915, the newly-arrived General Sir Charles Townshend in charge of the 6th (Poona) Indian Division, began operations to capture the Turkish administrative and supply base at Amara. By sheer audacity and backed by the imminent arrival of his main force, he and a small advance party of about 100 men managed to persuade the Amara garrison of 2,000 to surrender. This spectacular success of course encouraged Townshend's superiors to continue their aggressive policy.



By the end of September 1915, Townshend was poised to attack Kut and once more he rapidly succeeded in routing the enemy, who lost more than 5,000 men and all of their guns. A large part of the remaining Turkish force, however, was able to escape and it retired to prepared positions at Ctesiphon just twenty miles from Baghdad.

**The Battle for Ctesiphon** was to prove the turning point, with Townshend lacking the naval support available during earlier

encounters, due to the Turks' extensive deployment of mines and artillery, and also the shortage of men with no reserves to call upon. The British suffered some forty percent casualties and Townshend ordered a retreat back to Kut on 3 December 1915. Once there, he set about making preparations for its defence while he awaited the arrival of reinforcements from Basra.

Thomas George Irons was one of that exhausted band of men who found themselves under siege at Kut for the next five months. The Turkish force of more than ten thousand men arrived within a few days and, after several failed attempts to overcome the defences, they set about blockading the town. They also sent forces south to combat any efforts to bring relief to Kut.

The civilian population, kept in the town for their own safety, together with the remaining men under General Townshend's command, were about to endure a 143 day ordeal. Artillery barrages and small-arms fire rained down daily on the beleaguered inhabitants. Food, sufficient to last a month, had to be rationed further and efforts to drop supplies from aircraft were abandoned after proving insufficient and ineffective. Horses were shot and scavenging for any edible green-stuff was a regular activity. Poor nutrition and hygiene had the inevitable result and many of those there became ill with dysentery and similar conditions. Medical care was limited and medicines were barely available. Relief was constantly anticipated but all efforts, including those mounted by upwards of 20,000 men, were thwarted by the Turkish forces.



Kut across the Tigris showing a bomb damaged minaret and the British Union Flag flying above a building to the right.  
Artist: Donald Maxwell © IWM (Art. IWM ART 2436)



British graves in Kut town. Photograph: Ariel Vargas  
© Imperial War Museum

Finally, following negotiations in which General Townshend tried to obtain parole for himself and his men, the Sixth Division was forced into unconditional and immediate surrender. On 29 April 1916, they spiked their guns, destroyed any remaining ammunition and awaited the entry of the Turks into the town. Instead of a formal entrance into Kut however, groups of unkempt, armed men arrived and began looting and anyone protesting was beaten. They entered the hospital and robbed patients who were too ill to move.

Almost immediately following the surrender, the officers were separated from the men. Thomas, who must have been already ill at

the time, was one of about three hundred men of the Battalion who were marched to Shumran, about seven miles upriver. There, on the 8th May 1916, he succumbed to the dysentery that was to claim the lives of so many others.

For those able, and many barely able, the march was to continue to Baghdad. The heat was intense, there was little food and the looting and beatings continued. After a brief stay in Baghdad, encamped by the railway station in appalling conditions but with the “luxury” of two small loaves of bread each day, the men were moved on by train and further marches to Mosul and on into Anatolia. 104 men, actually belonging to the Regiment, were sent to Airan to work on the construction of the Baghdad to Constantinople railway.

Of those NCO's and Other Ranks of the Regiment who began the journey from Kut, only 74 survived to be released in 1918 and 213 died in captivity.

The name of Thomas George Irons is inscribed on the Basra Memorial along with those of 285 other men of the OBLI, who died during the campaign in Mesopotamia. He is also remembered on the Amersham War Memorial and the High Wycombe Hospital Memorial.

He was awarded The 1914-15 Star, The British War Medal 1914-18 and The Allied Victory Medal.



The Basra Memorial. Photographs Courtesy: British War Graves

## Thomas George Irons is remembered with Honour on the Basra Memorial

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