

L/Cpl W.J.Razzell – The Queen’s (Royal West Surrey Regiment)

William James Razzell was born in Westcott in 1885, the son of William and Alice Razzell of 3 Victoria Cottages, Bailey Road. William’s father was a gardener on the Bury Hill Estate and William followed the same occupation. He enlisted in Dorking and joined the 1st/5th Bn. The Queen’s (Royal West Surrey Regiment) which had formed at Guildford before it moved first to India in October 1914, and on to Mesopotamia (now Iraq) in December 1915. William Razzell was awarded the 1914/15 Star which shows that he was serving in an operational theatre before 31 December 1915, so he would have been with the regiment when it disembarked in Basra.

After landing at Basra, the battalion moved upriver by boat to join the 12th Indian Brigade at Nasariyeh where they were to stay for the next two years. The campaign against the Turks had badly stalled. A large British force was trapped in the north at Kut-al-Amara. The town could not be kept supplied and fell to the Turks in April 1915. Much preparatory work was needed to improve port facilities, roads and river transport before the campaign could make a fresh start.

Nasariyeh was a trying place to be stationed. Situated on the marshes of the River Euphrates, the area was subject to severe flooding in the rainy season; it could be intensely hot and sometimes bitterly cold. Cholera and enteric fever were ever-present and the local population were hostile; the British force was constantly subject to sniper fire and minor skirmishes with local tribesmen were a common event.

Following a series of raids against the British, the commander decided to take punitive action by burning the town of As Sahilan and blowing up its defensive towers. At 4.00 am on 11th September 1915 a force comprising several companies from the Queen’s, the Dorsets, 2nd/5th Gurkhas and 90th Punjabis with supporting artillery advanced towards As Sahilan where they met fierce resistance. The force eventually carried the town which was destroyed. The force was then ordered to retire but came under heavy fire and took casualties as it withdrew. The regimental diary records that *‘a lack of medical tongas (two-wheeled carts) proved costly as companies were rapidly reduced in numbers owing to the large numbers of effective men required to carry in the casualties from As Sahilan to the Shatra Gate, about*

6 miles'. The diary also reports that *'during the late stages of the retirement there was little or no artillery support, possibly owing to the fact that signal communications broke down'*. The action had been fought in intense heat, with the temperature up to 105°F in the shade. The battalion returned to camp at 2.00 – 2.30 pm.

The British force had achieved its objective in destroying As Sahilan and had inflicted heavy casualties on the tribesmen, but at a cost – 198 men were killed or wounded. In the 1st/5th Queen's, 2 Officers and 8 Other Ranks were killed; 3 Officers and 34 Other Ranks were wounded. The regimental diary lists the casualties which included *Pte W.J.Razzell of 'A' Company among those who were killed. The diary records that all the bodies were recovered and buried with military honours at 6.30 pm that day. The following day two more men died - one of wounds received in the action, the second of heatstroke sustained while helping to carry a wounded comrade back from As Sahilan.

The 1st/5th Queen's continued to occupy Nasariyeh until early 1918 when they moved further north when the Mesopotamian campaign was renewed. The battalion was stationed at Ramadi, north-west of Baghdad, when the Armistice with the Turks was signed on 30th October 1918.

William Razzell is buried in grave IV R.5 in Basra War Cemetery which contains the graves of 2,551 members of the British forces who died in the First World War, including 1,000 which were brought in from Nasariyeh and other areas outside Basra after the war ended.

***Footnote** William Razzell is shown as a Lance Corporal on our memorial and on the records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. He is recorded as a Private in the regimental diary and his medal index card at the Public Record Office has the rank of Lance Corporal crossed out and Private written in. It appears he had temporary promotion to Lance Corporal for a while but his substantive rank was Private.