Toiling Up The River Tigris

Motley Pagentry of the Babylonian Waterway—The Difficult Task of Feeding the British Army in Mesopotamia.

(By Edmund Candler, special correspondent with the Expeditionary Forces in Mesopotamia.)

The first line of transports, as everybody knows, carries the ammunition and tools sufficient for the day to the army in the field. The second line carries the day's rations, kit and blankets. The third line is the general reserves, from which the daily issues proceed; it does not as a rule come under the enemy's fire. With a line of communication 400 miles long the army is hard put to it which cannot depend on river or rail.

In Mesopotamia the Tigris serves as the third line for British and Turk alike. We, with our access to the sea, can increase and replenish our river transport indefinitely, whereas the Turk must carry on with his present fleet. He has five large rivers north of Kut-el-Amara, but these can only carry so far as his base at Shumran, five miles north of General Townshend's position, which commands the river and cuts his lines of communication south. From Shumran supplies are conveyed to the troops on either bank of the river by camels and donkeys. As regards rations, the country is nearly, if not quite, self-supporting.

The Desert Gap.

To supplement his river transport the enemy has his railway running north of Bagdad ninety miles to Samarah, beyond which there is the gap of some 360 miles across the desert to the railhead at Rasel-Ain. Until this line is complete and the tunnels driven through the Tauru and Amanthus mountains—that is, for an indefinite length of time—the advantage in the transport of troops and equipment must be with us.

The carrying capacity of the Tigris with its present fleet is not equal to that of a single line of railway with an average supply of rolling stock, but it is increasing in proportion to the development of the campaign. The river, with sufficient craft and the traffic well regulated, would have certain advantages over a railway, offering fewer vulnerable points and demanding a minimum of troops for guard duty; but the siding difficulties of the permanent way would have their parallel at low water in the narrows, especially between Qurnah—the Amara, where it is difficult for ships to pass, and to Qurnah the Shat-el-Arab is navigable for ocean-going steamers of a certain draught; above Qurnah vessels drawing four or five feet of water are frequently held up.

Piratical Craft.

The fleet of transports, mostly paddle-steamers of from 400 to 500 tons, drawing from four to five feet of water, each with a lighter attached starboard and port, keep pace with the army on the bank, and each brigade has its parent ship from which it draws supplies. The parent ship is, in its turn, led by the mahailas. These local river craft make a picturesque fleet with their high forward sloping mast, huge rudder, lateen sail, and cutaway prow, pointed and barbed. They are painted like the Chinese junk, but with Arab designs and characters, the star and the crescent, and figures like the signs of the Zodiac, generally white on a ground of green or red or yellow.

Each boat carries a large clay oven like an ant-heap, and the poop is boarded over for the crew. They are a wild, piratical-looking craft, rude and primitive as the Arabs who navigate them, and they would lend themselves well to illustrations of the sagas. The mahaila carries anything from fifteen to seventy tons. She can make ten miles a day towed against the current, and four to six knots an hour with a following wind. The bulk of this invaluable fleet is with us, and only an inconsiderable part in the hospital zone north of Kut-el-Amara.

The Arab name for the long, narrow, canoe-shaped boats of the country, the gondola of Basra, is the bellum. It is punted or paddled (preferably paddled) according to the depth of the water. The martial suggestion in the word was reduplicated during the amphibious phases of the campaign when the craft were referred to in official despatches as "war-bellums." They were collected and armoured with iron plate and used for conveying infantry to the assault of the enemy's position.

A Weird Vessel.

To supplement the self-respecting paddle-steamers of the Tigris, the most heterogeneous collection of scrap-iron and remnants of river traffic has been gathered in, taxing the resources of India's inland navigation from Bhamo to Scinde. How this craft ever found its way over the ocean, the Providence which watches over the improvident alone knows. Beyond question the boat of the most catholic ancestry at present on the Tigris is the "aerial," half houseboat, half aeroplane. The hull is from the Brahmaputra, and it is fitted with an air propeller and a fifty horse-power semi-Diesel type engine, and it makes more noise than a minor battle.

It once plied as a shikar or huntsman's boat in Assam, but its owner and navigator had a happy inspiration and this miracle of private improvisation is now the officially recognized hospital ferry. It plies hourly between the field ambulance on the river bank and the hospital camp. It has run the gauntlet of shot and shell and mine, and the adventures of its navigator between Ctesiphon and Sheikh Saad alone would provide material for a bulky volume.

Another boat indigenous to the Tigris is the caldron-like gufar of Bagdad, probably the oldest vessel in the world. A gufar moored alongside the "aerial" offers a striking picture in the evolution of craft. They are of reed, backed with wooden uprights plastered over with pitch from the bitumen wells of Hitt. Herodotus described them "sound as bucklers" spinning down stream with merchandise from Nineveh to Babylon. Each gufar carried a donkey, and was navigated by two men. Arrived in Babylon and the merchandise disposed of, the gufar was dismembered and the parts carried back overland by the passenger ass.

In describing the river craft I have said nothing about the Navy or the Royal Indian Marine, our advance guard and rearguard. The constitution of this fleet and its immediate activities are secrets which may only be divulged after the war.

NOT TO BE "DONE."

Sandy MacGregor lived not one hundred miles from Aberdeen. He recently visited London and on starting his homeward journey, found he had lost his pocketbook containing over fifty pounds.

So he telegraphed to the London station, stating his loss and asking that it should be kept till his next journey south, a month later.

In due course he turned up and the pocketbook was handed over to him. The finder, a young porter, stood by expectantly while Sandy counted his money.

Then the Scot gazed long and searchingly at the clerk in the inquiry office.

"What's the trouble?" asked the latter, anxiously, "isn't it right?"

"Aye, it's richt enough," replied Sandy, sternly, "Bit whaur's the month's interest?"—Tit-Bits.

A Lyons correspondent, in speaking of the fair which was opened in that city on March 1, says that the avowed purpose is to rival, ultimately, the great Leipzig fairs.

The purposes of the fair, he writes, are patriotic, and no immediate profit is anticipated beyond that which flows from the presence of thousands of visitors in a town which boasts of large hotels and plenty of accommodations. Expenses connected with the installation are covered by the subscriptions of the exhibitors and the grants of local bodies, which include the Conseil-General of the Rhone, the municipality, and the chamber of commerce. No goods will pass over the counter; samples alone will form the token of commerce. Over $50,000,000 was the annual total of business at the Leipzig fair, and enough orders were taken to keep mills and factories going the whole year. The Lyons fair starts in the hope that it will grow into a volume of affairs as great as that. "Pourquoi pas?" asks the Lyonnais, proud of his past and conscious of his present.

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DR. J. E. CARNADAY, 202 Court Bldg., Sedalia, Mo.

References: Third National Bank, Sedalia, Mo. Send this notice to some eczema sufferer.

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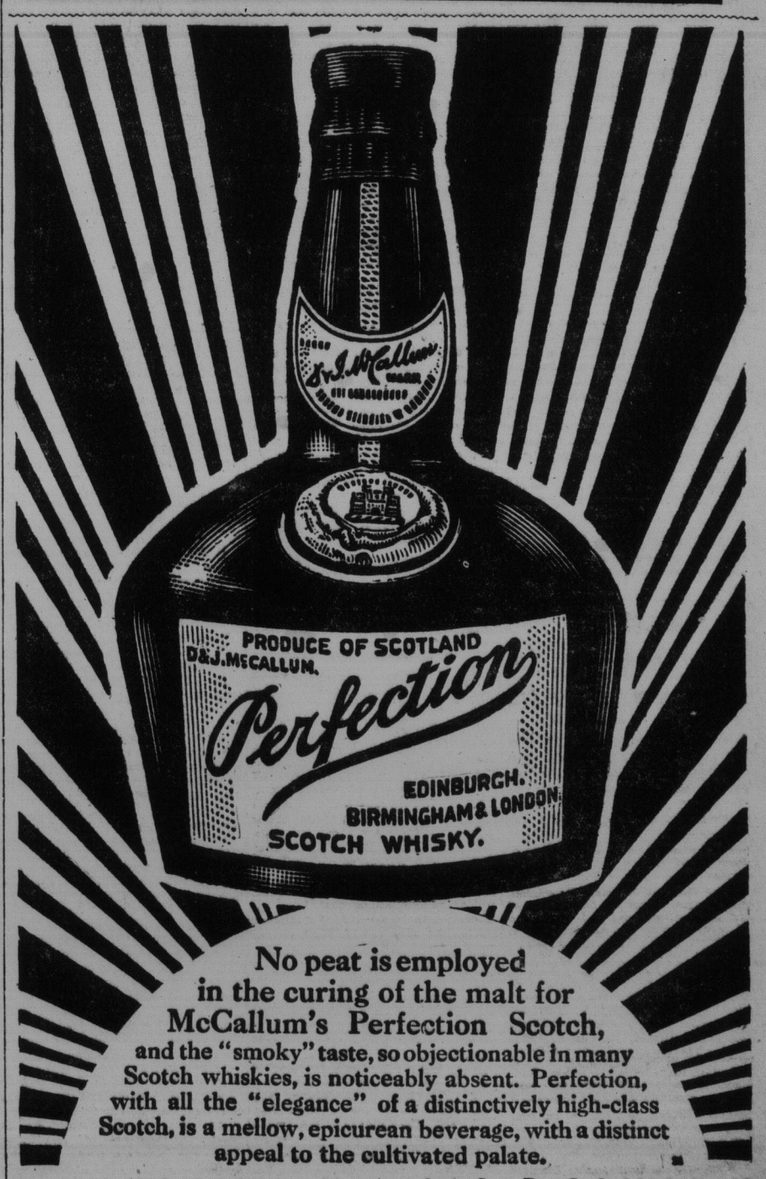

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