



John Weightman Warden (marked “Daddy”) with other members of an aerial course in October, 1917.  
City of Vancouver Archives CVA802-52

# Dunsterforce

By Lisa Smedman

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In January 1918, Lieutenant Colonel John Weightman Warden faced the toughest decision of his long military career. He’d just received word that volunteers were being recruited for a “secret mission” in some distant land far from the trenches of France—a mission that, he later recalled, “was mysteriously whispered was a very dangerous one.”

Volunteering for this mission, however, would mean giving up command of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion—men he’d personally recruited from Vancouver and from smaller towns throughout B.C. After leading them through the battles of the Somme and Passchendaele, leaving “Warden’s warriors” behind would, he said, be “the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life.”

Fellow officers warned Warden that joining the mission would mean “throwing away” his military career. But Warden, a veteran of the Boer War who had been seriously wounded in the second battle of Ypres in April 1915, welcomed the opportunity to get out from under the thumb of senior staff he’d been having “heated” arguments with. And so he volunteered.

Warden reported to London, where he underwent a medical exam. He was interviewed by a British colonel who asked if he could ride, and how good a shot he was with a

revolver.

The volunteers for the mission—which required 150 officers and 300 NCOs—included Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans and Imperials (British), all with at least a year’s worth of front-line experience. They were, said Warden, “highly individualistic characters... men of the do or die type.” All of the officers, and most of the men, had received decorations for valour—some, as many as five times.

They were told they would be “embarking on one of the most dangerous missions that British troops had ever been asked to attempt.” Wild speculation followed. Some of the recruits thought they would be bound for Ireland, or that they’d be used to put down French Canadian “revolts” in Quebec. Others guessed Egypt or East Africa.

When the volunteers were introduced to 15 Russian officers who would be acting as interpreters, rumour had it they were going to fight the Bolsheviks. But then came a confusing order: they should pack both cold-weather gear—and kit suitable for the tropics.

At long last, they learned their destination: the Caucasus, the region between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea where the Ottoman Empire (modern Turkey) bordered the recently collapsed Russian Empire’s territory in Georgia.

Formerly, the Turks in this region had been held in check by the Russians, but following the Bolshevik revolution Russia’s armies were deserting in droves, exposing the flank of British troops in Mesopotamia and Persia (Iraq and Iran). Should the Turks and Germans march through this gap, they could threaten British holdings in Afghanistan—and perhaps even India, the jewel in the British Empire’s crown.

The officer assigned to lead the secret mission was British General Lionel Charles Dunsterville. A boyhood friend of

Rudyard Kipling, Dunsterville had inspired the lead character in Kipling's novel *Stalky & Co.*

Ultimately, the adventures of the 41 Canadians who joined "Dunsterforce" would rival those of Lawrence of Arabia. They encountered German spies and Turkish deserters, aided Christian Armenians and Assyrians fleeing the Turks, and saw starving Persians dying by the thousands along the roadsides. They dined with wealthy "sheiks," rescued American missionaries, battled Kurdish tribesmen, and fought shoulder to shoulder with Russian Cossacks who had rejected the Bolshevik revolution. All the while, they struggled to form locals into makeshift battalions to fight the Turks.

The men of Dunsterforce succumbed to cholera, malaria, dysentery and sandfly fever. They ducked bullets from sniping tribesmen and incurred the wrath of local mullahs when they violated Moslem customs. They traveled by truck, camel, horse and mule, backed up by armored cars and a handful of airplanes, marched on foot for days on end while eating only iron rations and mildewed chapattis, and attempted to build roads and bring famine relief to the locals. Ultimately, they participated in the Battle of Baku and escaped by the skin of their teeth while under fire from gunboats.

Warden kept a diary of his eight months with Dunsterforce, from the time of its creation until it was disbanded in September 1918. In this diary, a portion of which is preserved at the City of Vancouver Archives, Warden recorded the triumphs and frustrations of the mission. His writing provides detailed observations of the Middle East and its people, and offers a fascinating glimpse into one of the most "hush-hush" missions of the First World War.

Tucked into a file folder at the City of Vancouver Archives is a small notebook, its red-and-green cover labeled "Persian." In it are the handwritten notes Warden made during his assignment to Dunsterforce.

Part of the notebook is devoted to such useful Persian phrases as "Please show me the way," or "Have you any bread?" or "May I stay here tonight?" or "I am English." Warden also made notes on how to ask what day an event occurred, where the person had come from or was going to, how far away the next destination might be, and whether the person had a horse.

He also included appropriate greetings: "Salaam Alakim," and "Walakim salaam."

Elsewhere in the notebook can be found detailed information on the men under Warden's command. Warden was most senior of the 15 Canadian officers—half of whom had been promoted to acting captain after assignment to Dunsterforce. The 26 Canadian NCOs also received promotions; privates, lance corporals, corporals and acting sergeants all became acting sergeants.

Warden notes whether the men were single or married, their professions, whether they'd seen service in South Africa during the Boer War, if they formerly belonged to a militia unit, when they enlisted for the Great War, and any decorations received.

For example, he noted that 24-year-old Sergeant Tom

Ridgeway of Collingwood, Ontario, a pipefitter, had been a "sailor on Great Lakes" and had been trained as a "bomber" (trained in the use of grenades). So had Sergeant Alfred Swanwick, a coal miner from Springhill, Nova Scotia, who at 29 was married and the father of three children.

Thirty-two-year-old Sergeant Wilfred Elmer Cummings of Calgary, a stationary engineer, held a certificate in marksmanship and had experience as a transport driver.

Sergeant Frank Longhurst, a car and airbrake inspector, was a "good horseman." At 44, he was probably the oldest of the Canadian NCOs in Dunsterforce. The youngest Canadian NCO was likely Sergeant Frederick Carey Parsons of Winnipeg, a boilermaker who would have been just 20 when Dunsterforce was formed.

The Canadians in Dunsterforce came from a variety of civilian professions. In addition to farmers and labourers, they included a telephone lineman, cabinet maker, baker, student, boiler maker, bank manager and clerk, accountant, printer, insurance agent, glass moulder, teamster, and a former member of the Royal North West Mounted Police. Warden himself was a broker and realtor prior to the war.

Some of the men had unusual skills. Sergeant Alex Miler Ramsay, 35, a tailor from Victoria, had spent three years in India with the Imperial (British) army and "speaks Hindou (sic)," Warden noted.

One of the most colourful of the Canadians under Warden's command was Sergeant Leon Bedat, also from Vancouver. Born in France, Bedat had previously served for 12 years with the US Navy—service that spanned both the Spanish American War and the Boxer Rebellion. Warden noted that Bedat had also spent "14 months with Venzuala (sic) rebels."

According to Bedat's attestation form (available online through the Library and Archives Canada website), he stood five foot, five inches tall and had tattoos of a dragon and a "Japanese lady" on his arms. In 1918, he would have been either 27 years old (according to the date of birth given on the attestation paper) or 38 years old (the age listed on the back of the same form).

Sergeant William Edward Trevor, 24, a textile worker, was another ex-US Navy man. Trevor listed his address as Lowell, Massachusetts when he enlisted in July 1916, but he also lived in Vancouver. Trevor was one of the taller men in Dunsterforce; he stood six foot, one inch tall. (Warden was taller, at six foot, two inches.)

Sergeant Roy Casey, 27, was born in New York but had been working as a carpenter in Vancouver when he enlisted in November 1914. He also, according to Warden's notes, had experience as a bricklayer and lumberman. Casey served with the 29<sup>th</sup> Vancouver Battalion (Tobin's Tigers) before volunteering for Dunsterforce.

Captain Cecil John Lewis, 38, was another Vancouverite. He enlisted in Calgary in January 1915 and gave his occupation as a rancher.

Dunsterforce also included two other men from British Columbia. Captain Gordon Scott\_Hopkins, 33, of Hopkins

Landing on the Sunshine Coast, enlisted in May 1916. He was a mechanical engineer and master mariner.

Sergeant Thomas Henry Pegg, 37, was a general merchant and clerk from Canoe, B.C. Married with two children, Pegg enlisted in December 1914. Warden noted that Pegg could drive and was a sailor who was experienced with marine gas engines.

After forming up in England, the men of Dunsterforce sailed to Cherbourg, France, then traveled by train to Taranto, Italy. From there, they sailed to Alexandria, Egypt. During the Mediterranean crossing, they attended language lessons in Persian and Russian. Their ship was pursued by "Hun" submarines.

After traveling by train to Port Said, the men transferred to the *S.S. Nile*, which, Warden learned to his horror, had just disembarked a labour battalion of Indian "coolies," some of whom had smallpox. The ship was, Warden noted in his diary, "the dirtiest transport I have ever been aboard."

"It was decided that, as we were only Colonials, it did not matter," Warden wrote.

During the trip down the Red Sea, one of the Dunsterforce armored car drivers, together with two marines en route to India, broke into the ship's bar and stole cigarettes. Those who witnessed the theft refused to turn the others in. "I am certain that there are many of this type of men who will make a mess of things for us on the expedition," Warden wrote.

Dunsterforce eventually disembarked at Basra, at the northern end of the Persian Gulf in modern Iraq. There, Warden explored the city's Oriental bazaars that sold silks, copper items, garments, dates and meats. He attended Arab theatres where boys passed around coffee and "hubble-bubble pipes" while men watched "suggestive" dances performed by women bedecked with rings, bracelets and anklets, with gold coins braided in their hair.

Basra's streets, he wrote, were filthy and filled with mud. "When the sun came out the stench was beyond belief."

While in Basra, Warden and several other officers attended the wedding celebration of the son of Sheik Mohammerah (or Mahomerah), who was marrying a 12-year-old girl. In an opulent palace filled with mosaics and Persian carpets and fitted out with its own electric plant, they dined, and were constantly kept supplied with liquor and cigars. Afterward, they watched a fireworks display and enjoyed a film in the sheik's private theatre. The celebration lasted until morning; the officers didn't dare leave until the sheik had risen from his seat.

Warden disapproved of the way the British in Mesopotamia were conducting themselves. He complained in his memoirs there were "1,000 officers doing 50 officers' work [in Basra], all running after the nurses, just as they do in India in peace time."

After a week in Basra, Dunsterforce traveled up the Tigris River aboard "river barges" (paddle wheelers) operated by the

1<sup>st</sup> Overseas Canadian Pioneer Detail, many of whom were also from B.C. They steamed past date palms and ruins Warden was certain dated from Biblical times. The heat, at times, reached 135 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade.

On March 28, Warden at last reached Baghdad, which had been captured by the British from the Turks one year before. There, he reported for instructions to General William Marshall, commander in chief of the British forces in Mesopotamia.

His reception wasn't what Warden expected. Marshall, Warden wrote, tapped his pencil on the table and asked, "Who are you and what are you here for, anyway?"

From Baghdad, Warden traveled by train to Ruz, a military depot and supply station. In his diary, he complains of half rations—the unnecessary result, he wrote, of a poorly organized transport system. It was, he noted, "frightfully hot & flies & mosquitoes are as thick the very air one breathes. One has to cover one's mouth when yawning in order to keep from inhaling (sic) & swallowing a few doz."

On May 25, Warden set off for Hamadan, where Dunsterville had set up his headquarters. Mule carts hauled the supplies, while the men marched along rough, dusty roads that wound through mountain passes.

Along the way, tribesmen took potshots at them. Warden had a "close call" when he was sniped at while reconnoitering the route ahead. "My swift Arab horse saved me," he wrote, adding, "These hill tribesmen are poor sportsmen."

The men under Warden's command marched the first 175 miles in 13 days on iron rations. "We were supposed to be able to purchase plenty of food but absolutely nothing but goats can be had," he wrote. "The native people are dying of starvation by the road sides. Its (sic) a pitiful sight to see them come & beg for food & one has to refuse owing to a shortage of rations."

During a rest stop at Kermanshaw, Warden had tea at the American mission with Reverend Stead and his wife, a Canadian woman. Although corpses of famine victims littered the town's bazaar, Warden was able to purchase mutton, rice, tea, cheese and chapattis. "It is not very filling but the best that can be obtained."

During the long march, the men were often "footsore." Boots had to be repaired, and mules re-shod. Men suffered from dysentery after eating chapattis that were "mildewed & sour. Made from bad wheat with straw ground up in it. All musty like." Warden had discipline problems; some of his men tried to get into the barrel of rum that had been included in the rations.

At last, after a march of about 300 miles, the men reached Hamadan in modern Iran on June 18.

Warden wrote that Hamadan was a "pretty place" but that "one dare not go about without a revolver & it is unhealthy to go to town alone." He added, "The average Persian is a masterpiece at stealing & one must go to sleep with the first finger on the trigger of ones (sic) revolver in order to save ones (sic) kit."

In Hamadan, Warden met Mrs. Stead, the Canadian wife

of an American missionary. The area had been in the grip of a famine since early 1917—by 1919 starvation, together with disease brought on by malnutrition, claimed the lives of an estimated nine to 11 million Persians.

Captain Robert Harrison, another Canadian member of Dunsterforce, recalled some of the orphaned children the Steads were trying to help.

“Those children were collected from the surrounding country where they had been living on acorns and were practically beyond hope when committed to her charge,” he was quoted as saying in “Canadians in Dunsterforce,” an article that appeared in the *Canadian Defence Quarterly* of January 1931. “Their abdomens were distended to hideous size, and this, together with their spindly legs, their wan and hollow faces, and the bones protruding through their skin, gave them the appearance of monstrous little gnomes.”

Warden traveled by car to Kazvin (modern Qazvin, a city in modern Iran about 165 kilometres northwest of Tehran) where he met Dunsterville for the first time. Dunsterville was seven years older than the 46-year-old Warden, who wrote that Dunsterville was a “genial old soul.”

Warden was put in charge of organizing and staffing an administrative office in Kazvin, a walled city that lay astride several major transportation routes. “All roads lead through here,” Warden noted.

“Very quiet here,” he added. “A sniper takes a shot at you once in a while but they are rotten shots. It is so very tame as compared to the war [in France]. Now & then a man is killed but nothing to keep up excitement. I am frightfully bored. I hope I shall get home before long or back to France, where things are moving.”

While in Kazvin, Warden lost men to cholera. He inspected the source of drinking water his men had been using, and found to his horror that the locals had been washing their dead in it. “Also their dirty clothes & they even relieve nature in these water courses & wash their private parts.”

Warden managed to insult a religious leader during Ramadan, the Moslem month of fasting. When “shouting” disturbed his sleep, Warden went with an interpreter, gun in hand, and told the local mullah to “shut up.”

He later wrote, “I was sorry afterwards as I did not know it was a religious ceremony.”

Warden was starting to realize Dunsterforce probably wouldn’t succeed in its original mission. In June, he wrote, “I do not think we shall get to the Caucasus at all... We should have been sent here last August or July, a year ago.”

By the end of July, he complained bitterly of the lack of food, transportation, ammunition and medical supplies and personnel and had changed his opinion of Dunsterville. “This is the most disorganized show I have ever been on,” he wrote. “Gen. Dunsterville has not the vaguest idea of organization & most of his Staff is worse. I am sure that unless GHQ Baghdad takes hold of us, we shall be in a mess this winter.”

He added, “This is the biggest game of Bluff I ever saw played.”



Dunsterforce officers with local children at Hinaidi, near Baghdad. Australian War Memorial Negative Number J01298

Although Dunsterforce was originally conceived of as a single fighting force, its officers and men were split up and sent on different missions, after the original goal of marching to the Caucasus was abandoned.

While Warden was busy administering Kazvin, other Canadian members of Dunsterforce trained local levies of soldiers, patrolled roads, and supervised “famine relief,” which took the form of paying the locals to construct roads.

One Canadian officer, Major Harold Kenzie Newcombe, of Winnipeg, was attached in June 1918 to a force of Cossacks commanded by Colonel Lazar Bicherakov (also spelled Bicharakov, Bicharakoff or Bickerakoff). Bicherakov at first refused to join the Russian revolution, but later did so out of political expediency. Newcombe then became the only Canadian officer to have officially served with a Bolshevik force.

A handful of Canadians were assigned to a group that rode out to supply an Assyrian army with weapons, ammunition and money—only to wind up fighting a desperate rearguard action to protect Christian Assyrians and Armenians fleeing a Turkish massacre.

That portion of the Dunsterforce story was told by an Australian officer, Captain Stanley George Savige, in his book *Stalky’s Forlorn Hope*. Savige describes the starving Persians he saw at Kirmanshah, during his march from Baghdad to Hamadan.

(Savige was part of a different group, consisting of 50 officers and 150 NCOs, that set out for Hamadan a month earlier than Warden did; this group included the Canadian officer Captain J.M. Fisher.)

“Knots of starving inhabitants were seen scattered across the valley actually eating grass, and every step in the city brought one face to face with a living skeleton,” Savige wrote. “Those strong enough begged or watched their opportunity to steal. Those too weak to stand, lay dying in the streets... Mothers... clung to their dying, and in many cases, dead

children; children crowded round the dead body of a parent, while many were so weak that a touch would fell them to the ground, from which they could not rise without assistance.”

Later in his narrative, Savige describes the devastation the famine had wrought on the area around Hamadan. “Whole villages were without inhabitants, all of whom had died...” The famine had been caused, he said, by a two- to three-year interruption of the crops. “First the Turk, then the Russians had swept the country bare of what it nourished. To make matters worse, the Government, represented by the Shah and thieving ministers, had cornered all the grain. The products of the South, untouched by war and free from famine, were controlled by the royal ring with special care that only a limited quantity at a time was released to the public in order to maintain the high prices.”

Savige was stationed in the town of Bijah, west of Hamadan. His orders were to keep the Bijah-to-Hamadan road clear. Fisher was one of the men who patrolled this dusty highway. On one occasion, accompanied by a couple of sergeants, Fisher rode nearly non-stop through 100 miles of hostile territory, dodging “wild tribesmen” along the way.

In mid-July, Savige received orders to transport 45,000 pounds sterling of Persian silver, 12 Lewis machine guns, and ammunition to a local army of Assyrians and Armenians under the leadership of Agha Petros. This army, 15,000 strong, had been fighting the Turks near Lake Urmiah.

(According to “Canadians in Dunsterforce,” Petros had a Canadian connection; he briefly lived in Vancouver prior to the war.)

Savige’s 23-man party set out on July 19, the officers riding horses; the sergeants on mules. Canadian sergeants Roy Casey and William Thomas Brophy, a 21-year-old student from Collingwood, Ontario, were part of the small force.

Along the way, Savige met a man who had served as interpreter for Canadian officer Captain J.H. McLean, also stationed in Bijah. Savige wrote, “Mac was a typical Canadian, and besides teaching this young hopeful a few words such as roads, creek, house, horse, etc., had added to his vocabulary some choice Canadian swear words.”

Savige and his men arrived at Sain Kala July 23 but there was no sign of Petros. The disappointed group turned back.

A week and a half later, Savige heard that Petros’ army had defeated the Turks in a “great battle” south of Lake Urmiah. Savige and his men rode out again—and this time met up with Petros. Savige was impressed with Petros’ personal flag “made of silk, fringed with gold with the usual white cross in the centre, over which was worked the Assyrian words, ‘Trust God and Follow the Cross!’”

Bad news soon followed. After Petros had departed from Urmiah, the Turks attacked again. Thousands of Christian refugees from that city were streaming south from that city.

Petros, Savige said, was devastated by the news.

Savige rode out Aug. 5 with two officers and six sergeants (including Brophy and Casey), armed with three Lewis machine guns, to do what he could.

“The first village we reached was a picture of chaos,

owing to the streets being so narrow, and the crowd of refugees so great that progress was almost impossible,” Savige wrote. “As we got out into the more open spaces of the valley, the road could be seen for some miles ahead. The people were streaming along in thousands, and hailed us on our approach as their deliverers. The men would shout in tones of great joy, ‘The English! The English!’ and fired their rifles in the air and shouted loud hurrahs. The unfortunate women were so overcome... that they wept aloud. Striking their breasts they would call down upon us the blessings of God and rush across and kiss our hands and boots in very joy at the sight of their first deliverance from the cruel raids of the Turks.”

The Christians, however, could be just as savage as those they were fleeing, Savige said. He wrote of entire Moslem villages laid waste, their inhabitants murdered and homes burned. “One very soon saw that the Mohammedan is not the only fanatic in the world, for the acts of these Christians were the outcome of pure fanaticism.”

Savige estimated the number of refugees fleeing Urmiah at 70,000. He and his handful of men protected the rear of the refugee column against their pursuers, fighting a rearguard action against Turkish cavalry and Kurdish horsemen who outnumbered Savige’s men ten to one. He made the best use of his small force that he could. He set up machine guns in a narrow valley and at other chokepoints along the road and managed to hold the enemy at bay. One of Savige’s men was killed.

Brophy assisted Savige with one of the machine guns, changing magazines as Savige fired. Savige later wrote, “young Brophy... throughout the day, was always nipping up when danger seemed to be most prevalent and he, on more than one occasion, saved my life.”

Both Brophy and Casey were later commended for their part in protecting the refugees. A supplement to the *London Gazette* of March 29, 1919, mentions that Casey received the Military Medal for his service in Mesopotamia.

The refugees eventually made it to the safety of Hamadan, and from there were sent to a refugee camp in Bakuba, a town near Baghdad.

The original mission of Dunsterforce had been to secure the Trans-Caucasian railway, which ran from Baku on the Caspian sea, west to the port of Batum (modern Batumi) on the Black Sea. Dunsterville had hoped to occupy Tiflis (modern Tbilisi), a town roughly halfway along the railway. There, he hoped to organize local troops to fight the Turks.

By August, it was clear this wasn’t going to happen. Dunsterforce—no longer the “hush hush” mission it once was—had a new mission: defending Baku, a city on the west coast of the Caspian Sea, in modern Azerbaijan. The city was considered important because it was a major oil producer; the British didn’t want this resource falling into Turkish hands.

The first British to arrive in Baku were a group of 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> North Hampshires, on Aug. 4. The day after their arrival,

these 45 men, together with local soldiers, defended the city from a Turkish attack.

British troops continued to trickle into the city throughout August. By September, Dunsterville commanded a force of approximately 900 officers and men, some from the original Dunsterforce, but most from the 39<sup>th</sup> Midland Infantry Brigade, which included portions of the 7<sup>th</sup> North Staffords, 9<sup>th</sup> Worcesters, and 9<sup>th</sup> Royal Warwicks. Also defending the town were 22 battalions of local militia—roughly 9,000 men, two-thirds of them Armenian and one-third of them Russian.

They faced a Turkish force estimated at 12,000 to 14,000 men.

Warden was one of seven Canadian officers from Dunsterforce who wound up in Baku. After recovering from a bout of “sandfly fever” in Kazvin, he reached Baku on Aug. 30 and was assigned quarters at the Hotel Metropole.

Baku, he wrote, “is a well built city of stone mostly & well lighted. Has some fine churches, clubs & public buildings & is a very rich town. Private houses are gorgeously furnished & everyone dresses with excellent taste & especially the women, who are mostly [Armenians].”

Dunsterville, in his 1920 book *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, wrote, “The population is approximately 300,000, chiefly Armenians, Tartars and Russians; there are also a few Georgians and Greeks, and smaller colonies of British, French, Americans and others. The country is entirely barren, except for avenues of trees grown in the town with the aid of the new water supply, and for the surrounding villages, which are really oases in the midst of sandy deserts and partly dried-up salt lakes.”

Warden’s duties were to inspect the Russian and Armenian troops in Baku.

“I am responsible for the disposition, defenses, [machine] guns, equipment, discipline, clothing, moral & anything else one might mention in the military line,” he later wrote.

A memo to Warden, preserved with his papers at the City of Vancouver Archives, orders him to attach British officers “to those units where they can be most advantageously used.” He was to visit all local infantry battalions and note the names of their officers, their numbers, the state of their clothing and equipment, what type of rifles they had, how much ammunition they had, whether they possessed machine guns, and how they were being fed. He was also to find out “whether the men are contented or have any grievances.”

Warden griped that the other senior officers in Baku all had touring cars—something he lacked. He bemoaned the task of supervising a front line 30 miles long on foot.

Warden was also to supervise the placement of machine guns. Assisting him with this task was Amsterdam-born Major John William Henry Vanden Berg, of Toronto, who had listed his occupation as “gentleman” when he enlisted in 1914. In addition to speaking English, Vanden Berg, 33, was fluent in Dutch, French, German and Spanish.

In his book, Dunsterville noted the challenges the pair of Canadian officers were faced with: “Before [Vanden Berg] took over his appointment the machine gun situation was

hopeless, the weapons being placed anyhow: sometimes in trenches with parallel lines of fire, and no field of fire, followed by large gaps with no guns at all... in many cases soldiers regarded their armament as their own property and not the property of the army.

“On one occasion Major Vanden Berg visited the line and sited the machine guns according to his scheme. On visiting the line shortly afterwards he found one gun missing, thus leaving a gap in the belt of crossfire. He complained of this, and was informed: ‘Oh, that gun belongs to X; he’s gone off duty and taken his gun with him.’ This stupid behaviour was put a stop to.”

The other Canadian officers at Baku were Captain Harrison (placed in command of the 24<sup>th</sup> Armenian Battalion), Captain Hopkins (in charge of supplies—or, as Warden writes, “disembarkation and billeting”), Major Newcombe (as paymaster) and Captain Lewis. Captain Adam Harrison Gilmour was also briefly in Baku, but was ordered across the Caspian Sea to Turkestan, to hook up with another British force.

The Turks massed troops for the coming attack and spent their time bombarding the town. Newcombe had a close call when a Turkish shell struck the hotel he was working in. The shell exploded in the room next to him, but Newcombe was unhurt.

Dunsterville wrote, “The clerks at their work were peppered with dust, a Russian lady [typist] was knocked over unharmed by the explosion of a shell in the adjoining room, and Major Newcombe had a narrow escape.”

The Turks attacked Baku Aug. 26 and Aug. 31. In the first week of September, Warden wrote in his diary, “The Turk made a very determined attack & drove us in. The Russians & Armanians (sic) ran away. The 39<sup>th</sup> [Brigade] made a frightful mess of things. No organization or any preparation though they saw the Turks massing for three days in front of them.”

By Sept. 1, a frustrated Dunsterville had had enough. He told the grandiosely named Central-Caspian Dictatorship—the revolutionary committee that ran Baku—that, “We came here to help your men to fight the Turks, not to do all the fighting, with your men as onlookers. In no case have I seen your troops, when ordered to attack, do anything but retire, and it is hopeless continuing to fight alongside of such men.”

Dunsterville told the committee he would evacuate the city that night, and warned them to begin negotiating a truce with the Turks.

Hours later, he returned to find the committee busy drafting demands that the British immediately transfer troops from Persia or Baghdad, despite Dunsterville having told them the British had already sent all the troops they could spare.

“When I returned to the hotel I found the various committees all passing resolutions as fast as they could. I begged of them to cease the resolutions and take some action, and again left them. In another hour I returned and found a sailor just putting the fourteenth resolution to the vote... Under such conditions I could not, in fairness to the town, carry out the immediate withdrawal of my troops.”



Horses pull the equipment of the 1st Wireless Signals Squadron of the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force near Hamadan in June 1918. The unit was responsible for communications between Dunsterforce and British headquarters in Mesopotamia.  
Australia War Memorial Negative Number P00562.126

Reluctantly, he stayed on.

The big attack came on Sept. 14—an attack a Turkish deserter had warned the British about one or two days previously. Warden estimated the enemy's strength at around 7,000 Turks and 5,000 local Tartars, backed up by field guns and cavalry.

The attack began at 4 a.m., but Warden didn't learn of it until 6 a.m., when his orderly woke him. Warden was ordered to go to the firing line and help organize the Russian and Armenian troops. Upon arrival, he found the Russian brigade commander "tearing his hair & acting like a man who had lost his mind or sense."

The day just got worse. Two of the Russian battalions had abandoned their lines when the attack began. The Turks were occupying their abandoned trenches, no more than 2,000 yards from the city.

Warden later wrote in his diary that the whole line was "falling back & men running away everywhere."

He commandeered a Ford van and drove it "right into the front line & tried to pull the men together. I got them to form a line & take up a position but it was too hot a corner to keep a motorcar in & I did not want to loose (sic) it by getting my driver hit & also I wished to visit the other part of the battle line. So I jumped in and drove along behind the crest we were holding. [High explosive shells] & 18-[pounder] shrapnell (sic) was falling very thick about us. I found a hopeless situation. Everyone falling back & many running away on this part of the front."

The British artillery was firing, but with little effect. Four armored cars sat idle at first, eventually drove to within 1,500 yards of the firing line, then "turned about & came back

without firing a round from their machine guns," Warden wrote.

Warden rushed here and there throughout the day; his only meal was an egg and a piece of black bread a Russian nursing sister handed him. By 5 p.m., the enemy had closed the net around the city. "Their rifle bullets were spitting against the sides of the streets all over the city & they shelled us out of our [headquarters] in the Hotels Europa and Metropole..."

The British and Bicherakov's Cossacks fought valiantly, Dunsterforce's four airplanes strafed and bombed the enemy, and its six armored cars harassed the Turks with machine guns, but it was a lost cause. By 5:30 p.m., Warden wrote, the British forces were hurrying toward the harbor, preparing to evacuate by boat.

Despite his misgivings that the residents of Baku might turn on him, Dunsterville warned the committee that ran the city that the British were leaving. The sick and wounded were loaded aboard two smaller ships, which steamed away. After a fighting retreat, the rest of Dunsterville's troops—seventy officers and 800 men—boarded the steamship Dunsterville had been using as his headquarters. Arms and ammunition and stores were loaded aboard a second, smaller ship.

The larger ship was delayed when its crew demanded it turn back after one sailor discovered his wife hadn't boarded, but it eventually crept out of harbour under cover of darkness late that night. The smaller ship, carrying the arms and ammunition, suffered six hits from enemy gunboats. At one point its captain wanted to turn back, but a British colonel held a revolver to the captain's head and forced him to steam on, despite the shelling by enemy gunboats.



An aerial shot of Baku, the oil town Dunsterforce tried to defend from the Turks.  
City of Vancouver Archives CVA802-10

Both made it safely to Enzeli, an approximately 18-hour journey. Much was left behind. "Very few kits were saved," Warden wrote. "All armored cars & motor cars were left on the wharf..."

"I never expected to witness such chaos among British military, especially the regulars," he later wrote. "Baku could have been held by good sound management & organization but Gen. Dunsterville was not capable of doing either and his Staff was far worse. Not the slightest move was made to meet the enemy during last night and when the attack (sic) [developed] nobody bothered to find out how it was going until I went out. To keep four new armored cars & never put them in action when we were being driven in & then leave them on the dock was in my opinion criminal..."

British casualties at Baku consisted of 180 dead, wounded or missing. The Turks were estimated to have suffered 2,000 casualties.

Canadian casualties at Baku included Sergeant Ambrose James Mahar, who was wounded in the shoulder Aug. 31. Mahar, a telephone lineman from Charlottetown, PEI, was 22 at the time.

One week after the retreat from Baku, on Sept. 22, the War Office ordered that Dunsterforce be dissolved. Although Dunsterforce had prevented the Turks from penetrating farther east—it had failed in its original objectives. There was no need for a "hush hush" mission any more. Conventional British forces would continue the task of providing a right flank for the British Mesopotamian Force.

After Dunsterforce disbanded, most of the Canadians who had served with it returned to their original battalions in France and Belgium. A handful were attached to British forces in the Middle East, either in Mesopotamia, or with Norperforce in North Persia.

The only Canadian to die as a result of his service with Dunsterforce was Sergeant Donald John MacDonald, a Scottish-born labourer from Calgary. MacDonald succumbed to smallpox while serving with Dunsterforce and was evacuated to Bombay, India. He died just a few days before his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, in December 1918.

By Sept. 25, Warden's diary mentions British victories in Palestine and in France. He wrote, "I hope I get back to France at an early date. They will surely release me now that

O



Dunsterforce has been disbanded.”

On Oct. 29, he wrote in his diary, “Just heard Turkey has surrendered unconditionally & Austria Hungary is all in & negotiating (sic) for peace.”

The Ottoman Empire (Turks) signed an armistice the next day.

By Nov. 17, the British were back in Baku. Warden lingered on, in Baghdad.

On Jan. 2, Warden learned he was destined for yet another obscure theatre of the Great War. He wrote in his diary, “Notified I was to go to Vladivostock by next boat via India & Japan.” Together with four other Canadians from Dunsterforce, he was assigned to the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force, which fought the Bolsheviks in Siberia.

Warden eventually returned to Vancouver in March 1920. After the war, he served as an alderman in West Vancouver. By 1930 he was living in Ontario.

Warden came away from Dunsterforce disillusioned with the British army. He groused about the NCOs he’d been put in charge of—the Australians, in particular, who he called an “undisciplined mob.” Many of these men, he said, were “really hard tickets.”

“I am perfectly convinced that our Canadians were selected in order to get rid of them, and not for their effeciency (sic) in their units... If I had the slecting (sic) not one of the Canadian officers or men would have been sent. From my own battalion I could have selected 1,000 per cent better men.”

Ultimately, a disilluioned Warden would sarcastically refer to the mission as the “Dunsterfarce.”

## Local forces in Baku

Among Warden’s papers at the City of Vancouver Archives is a typewritten list, dated Aug. 24, 1918. Drawn up by Lieutenant Colonel Clutterbuck, an Indian Army officer attached to Dunsterforce, it lists the 22 battalions of Armenians and Russians defending Baku, and gives their total “bayonet strength” as 9,151.

Clutterbuck rated their effectiveness as ranging from “very bad” to “good,” and noted that some had “Bolshevik tendencies.” One 350-man battalion was “not yet armed,” while another 140-man battalion had “never recovered from heavy casualties.”

Other forces listed by Clutterbuck included three “good” battalions totaling 880 men and three “unarmed” regiments totaling 711 men, all under the command of Colonel Bicherakov. Clutterbuck also listed Armenian irregulars, including 200 Dashnaktsutyun, as well as a “small number of cavalry.”

“Artillery is very chaotic, there are more guns than can be manned,” Clutterbuck noted.

“Politics,” he wrote, “...make it impossible to weld the whole force together. The Russians loathe the Armenians...”

The Russians, he noted, were defending Baku for various reasons: due to their political views or patriotism; to protect their homes; because they’d been mobilized, to make money, or “because they were starving.” He added, “The bulk of the Russians are apathetic and have no patriotism, do not want to fight and would be quite content to be ruled by us, the Germans, or the Turks, provided the ruler saved them the bother of ruling themselves or having to fight, and restored order and prosperity.”

Clutterbuck echoed the complaints of other Dunsterforce officers, who bemoaned the fighting capacity of the Armenians. He wrote, “The Armenian will have his throat cut if the Turk takes Baku, but notwithstanding this, is in most cases the most cowardly and ill disciplined in the whole Army.”



Lieutenant Colonel John Wightman Warden (tallest man, at centre) on board a ship leaving Mesopotamia after his service with Dunsterforce. The others are also mainly Dunsterforce men.

Australian War Memorial Negative Number J01318

## Canadians in Dunsterforce

Bedat, Leon, sergeant, 207973  
Brophy, William Thomas, sergeant, 642141  
Burbidge, Geoffrey? C., captain  
Campbell, Clifford George, sergeant, 54027 (54007)  
Casey, Roy, sergeant, 75341  
Chambers, Walter, captain  
Clark, Robert, sergeant, 5068  
Cummings, Wilfred Elmer, sergeant, 5175  
Estabrooks, Raymond, sergeant, 69257  
Fisher, J.M., captain  
Gathey, Alfred Prat, sergeant, 922428  
Gilmour, Adam Harrison, captain  
Hamilton, Samuel, sergeant, 79130  
Harrison, Robert, captain  
Hodgson, Thomas, captain  
Hopkins, Gordon Scott, captain  
Jackman, William Tooley, sergeant, 210619  
Lawrence, John, sergeant, 187362  
Leeds, John, sergeant, 439749  
Lewis, Cecil John, captain  
Longhurst, Frank, sergeant, 198310  
Mahar, Ambrose James, sergeant, A44193  
McCue, William Donaldson, sergeant, 28649  
MacDonald, Donald John, sergeant, 435026  
McLean, J.H., captain  
McWhirter, David Ferguson, sergeant, 907032  
Murdock (Murdoch?), William John, sergeant, 477622  
Murray, James ("Jimmmy"), sergeant, 117035  
Murray, Peter S., captain  
Newcombe, Harold Kenzie, major  
Parsons, Frederick Carey, sergeant, 311931  
Pegg, Thomas Henry, sergeant, 107475  
Petrie, William L., captain  
Ramsey, Alex Miller, sergeant, 102194  
Ridgeway, Tom, sergeant, 219  
Roberts, Guy Burland, captain  
Swanwick, Alfred, sergeant, 414761  
Trevor, William Edward, sergeant, 791221  
Vanden Berg, John William Henry (Gerritt Hopman), major  
Warden, John Weightman, lieutenant-colonel  
Weidmark, Lorne Festus, sergeant, 132824

## Further Reading

"Dunsterforce: A Case Study of Coalition Warfare in the Middle East, 1918-1919," by Lieutenant Timothy C. Winegard, can be found in Vol. 8.3 (Fall 2005) of the *Canadian Army Journal*, at <http://www.army.forces.gc.ca/caj>.

"Canadians in Dunsterforce," by Captain W.W. Murray, can be found in *Canadian Defence Quarterly*. The three-part series begins in the January 1931 issue.

The diary of Lieutenant-Colonel John Weightman Warden is at [www.gwpda.org/1918/WardenDiary.pdf](http://www.gwpda.org/1918/WardenDiary.pdf). His memoir *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, published in 1920, can be found at [www.archive.org/details/adventuresofduns00dunsrich](http://www.archive.org/details/adventuresofduns00dunsrich).

The diary of General Lionel Dunsterville can be found at [www.gwpda.org/Dunsterville/Dunsterville\\_1918.html](http://www.gwpda.org/Dunsterville/Dunsterville_1918.html).

*Stalky's Forlorn Hope*, a book by Captain S.G. Savige, an Australian member of Dunsterforce, can be found at <http://www.firstaif.info/stalky/0-stalky-index.htm>.

Additional articles by Lisa Smedman on military history, as well as on the City of Vancouver's history can be found at <http://www.lisamedman.topcities.com/>. (Scroll down to the bottom of the introductory page and click on the newspaper.)