

**Transcript (undertaken by Simon Phillips using AI) of interview with [Henry Edward Shortt](#)**

IWM ([00:29](#)):

Colonel Henry Edward. Short, reel one. What were you doing when war broke out?

HES ([00:34](#)):

I had just qualified as a medical man, just qualified.

IWM ([00:43](#)):

Where did you qualify?

HES ([00:44](#)):

In Aberdeen University.

IWM ([00:50](#)):

What did you decide to do when the war broke out?

HES ([00:52](#)):

Well, I immediately joined the Indian Medical Service, which was a service which about 600 British officers, British and Indian, serving the whole of India, military, civil administration, everything. Practically,

IWM ([01:23](#)):

Why did you decide to join the Indian Service?

HES ([01:25](#)):

Because my father had been in India and I followed on, and that is the history of many of the families who worked in India.

IWM ([01:36](#)):

Had you lived in India as a child? Had you lived in India as a child,

HES ([01:41](#)):

Only as a child, yes. I was born in India and like all European children, we were sent home for our education, and I spent my early days as a boy in Scotland, in the Highlands in Inverness, and from there, after school, I went to Aberdeen University to study medicine. That took five years, then the war broke out.

IWM ([02:18](#)):

Would you have joined the Army anyway?

HES ([02:21](#)):

I was going to join in any case, yes.

IWM ([02:26](#)):

What happened to you then when the war broke out?

HES ([02:29](#)):

I'm sorry to be so deaf.

IWM ([02:31](#)):

What happened to you? When the war broke out,

HES ([02:36](#)):

I was sent with a large part of the Indian army. Most of the Indian Army people on leave in this country or out of India were collected together, and we went out, most of us in one or two big transport ships. The one I was in docked in Karachi in the north of India. From there, I went down to Bombay by sea and then joined the cavalry regiment. Not immediately, but within a matter of week or two,

IWM ([03:37](#)):

Quite

HES ([03:37](#)):

New, quite inexperienced.

IWM ([03:44](#)):

You were quite inexperienced.

HES ([03:45](#)):

Well, yeah.

IWM ([03:48](#)):

You had only just qualified.

HES ([03:49](#)):

I'd only just qualified.

IWM ([03:50](#)):

So it was your first job?

HES ([03:52](#)):

Yes.

IWM ([03:54](#)):

What was your job? What was your job?

HES ([03:59](#)):

I was appointed to an Indian infantry regiment, but transferred almost immediately to a cavalry regiment, which was preparing to go on service and it would be from there, I can begin, I think. My regiment was the 33rd Cavalry, and we embarked on a ship called the Sofala, carrying the whole regiment, all its horses, camels, transport stores, everything down from Basra in Mesopotamia up. Basra is on the Shatt al-Arab River. Well, we were sitting at lunch one day when suddenly everything on the table began to go sideways, cutlery, crockery, everything with a bang. So we all rushed up on deck and found that our ship, which was only one in a long line of transports going up the river, Shatt al-Arab towards Basra, I should think, nearly a third or a half of the whole Indian army of every kind, Cavalry, infantry, gunners, everything. Our ship, this bang had rammed into the ship in front of it. They were stuck together and we stopped all the ships behind us. Might've been a real calamity.

(06:09):

Now we had four or 500 horses down in the hold. The captain sent the carpenter of the ship who was a Chinaman down the hole to see what damage had been done, and the Chinaman came running up, panic stricken, four feet of water in the hold, sir. The captain, thinking of all these horses down there, immediately ran the ship ashore on the bank of the river, and we were stuck. We kept all the ships behind us stuck also. Fortunately, it wasn't so bad because the river was a tidal one, and when the tide rose, we were able to back off the sandbank on which we had stuck. The only excitement was the exchange of polite, nautical language between the two crews. Well, that was the beginning of the war as far as I was concerned.

IWM (07:43):

Where were you bound for?

HES (07:44):

The barn?

IWM (07:45):

Where were you bound for?

HES (07:47):

We were bound from Basra on the Shatt al-Arab. Now let me see how far. The funny part really was that the Chinaman made a mistake in saying four feet of water in the hold, because he came up a second time. He said, me making mistake, I sound freshwater tank. However, that's about my

IWM (08:27):

What was happening at Basra.

HES (08:30):

Well, what happened then? We got off, as I say, from the bank, and we reached Basra without any special incident, and perhaps now I should describe a little of the country. Now that. The nature of the country, the best description I can give I think was in the words of a soldier who happened to be passing my tent. The tent flap was open. I heard him, and he described the country as miles and miles and miles of sweet Fanny Adams, you won't know what I mean, and a river running through it. And then it was raining. I could hear him squelching through the water as he walked, and he said, no wonder Moses lost his followers in this bloody country -that was the description. Now, it was very different in the desert.

In the desert. It was very, very dry, very, very hot blazing, hot in the daytime and chilly cold at night, going to evaporation in the dry air. You can imagine a truth of a description in the Bible of the comfort of a great rock in a weary land, the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

([10:31](#)):

Now, many things, do you want me to go on? Many things, of course, we found very different in a new country, new to us, new to most of us. For instance, in the river, although it was a freshwater, sharks were quite numerous. We were about 80 miles from the sea, but the sharks came up the river. One day Colonel Christophers and I were bathing in the river, not in the main river, but in a creek which flowed into the river, and we saw a crowd of Arab children gathering on the bank of this creek opposite us. They became a little annoying, and I shouted out to them, what are you doing there? Go away. And they said, we are waiting. And they said, what are you waiting for? Mind you, I could talk Arabic bit. I learned it before, and they said, we are waiting for the sharks to get you.

([11:48](#)):

Well, Christophers and I thought they looked as if they really meant it, so we quickly swam out. Now there's a sequel to that. A few days afterwards, I was in hospital for some minor complaint, and in the bed next to mine was a soldier. I asked him, why are you in hospital? He said, I am in here for a shark bite. And he said, we were bathing from a boat, I and some others, and a shark got hold of my leg and I had only saved by my comrades beating at a shark and pulling me into the boat, and he had a very badly lacerated leg that was really sorry. It was a secret to what we might have suffered. Now let me see where I.... Well, it took us, when we reached Basra, it took us some time to get the horses, which had been some weeks in the hold, fit for work, and we didn't do very much.

([13:16](#)):

Our first experience was a reconnaissance to see the strength of a Turkish force, which was a mile or some miles up river from Basra lined along a creek. We had no intention of attacking it, but just to find out. When we came near to this line of Turks, they were in a line on one side, we were in the line on the other. And they began to fire, a small round rifle fire from suddenly at one end, on the right flank there appeared a huge wild boar, and it ran right along between the two lines. Everybody on both sides firing very inaccurately, and the wild boar escaped on the next flank with a flick of its tail, a derisory flick.

IWM ([14:33](#)):

Were you given training in, go on. Were you given training in rifle firing

HES ([14:38](#)):

On, what

IWM ([14:39](#)):

Were you given training in firing, shooting. Did you have training for shooting?

HES ([14:48](#)):

Oh, yes. Oh yes. I had been accustomed to rifles from that side. My father was a great rifle shot. Now, our regiment was now removed from Basra three or four miles up river to a place called **McGill**, where we were camped in a date grove on the bank of the river, and here we were subject to nightly fire, **Adams, which were working** as labour in the camp at night from among the dead trees. They kept up a sniping fire at the camp, and we slept in tents. I mean, we slept in trenches, which were dug inside our tents in order to keep away the odd bullets. Of course, the camels we had couldn't be disciplined, stuck

their heads up above, and one of them got one of these bullets in the neck. That was that. The next day as medical officer, I had to dispose of the corpse. Well you couldn't dig it into the ground because the water table was only a foot or two above the surface, so we had to drag it out into the desert beyond the line of trees where jackals and vultures would dispose of it.

[\(16:49\)](#):

Now, from this camp, we made daily forays in platoon strength - that would be about a company size - into the desert, just see what was happening, what was there, and in one of these we came on a party of Turks who opened fire upon us. Our commander of this platoon was Major Anderson, and he decided immediately to attack the Turks. They were dotted about in scrub country. You could hardly see a man here and there. You couldn't really, they were not. Anyhow, he ordered our platoon to charge the area where they were, and it started just like as if it had been on the parade ground, trot, canter, gallop. Very quickly, we were right in among the Turks, but they simply scattered. You couldn't see them, bushes and all of it, so we didn't bother to follow them up. I saw one Turk firing at us from behind a bush. I jumped off my horse, threw the reins to my orderly, and seized hold of this man's rifle, and we had a tug of war. I was only using one hand as I had a revolver in the other, and suddenly a blinding flash in my face, didn't know what it was, temporarily blinded.

[\(18:54\)](#):

As soon as I could see I had a hold of the Turk's rifle. He was lying on the ground. I could have shot him, but I didn't because he ran on then and I let him go. Major Anderson, when I rejoined the rest, he said he was astonished how easily his sword had gone through a Turk. He said it was just like going through butter. He was so astonished, and it was. When we got back to camp, for the first time I realized what had happened with this flash in my face because the whole of my face was popped with unburnt grains of powder from the discharge. It must've been just right past my head, and these were picked out of my face, one by one by our Indian assistant surgeon. Now, shall I just go on like this? Where, from this camp, we were now transferred to a camp in the desert at a place called Shaibah, which was about 12 miles from Basra. This was a very bleak area, no trees, no vegetation practically. The only water supply was from wells in the desert and, from many of these, the water was so brackish that the horses wouldn't drink. That's kind of very bleak place and

[\(20:53\)](#):

Life was rather dull there. Nothing was happening until we were told, got orders to make a reconnaissance in strength to find out how far away, how big the concentration of the Turkish force was, and this reconnaissance was to be carried out by the cavalry, and the cavalry was our own regiment, my regiment, the 33rd and another regiment of cavalry, the 16th cavalry. These together were set out towards the direction of where the Turk was supposed to be. Well, we went for about 15 miles without meeting anything of any kind, wasn't much object going further, and we got the order to retire back to our main camp at Shaibah.

[\(22:05\)](#):

Now, when we suddenly started to go back again, this was taken as a sign of weakness and was a signal for the sudden appearance of absolute hordes of Arab cavalry, if you can call them cavalry. They had no order, no discipline, but were far outnumbering our force, and they were under no sort of control. They were simply single units. They were just like scattering pepper, they were so numerous, all out of sight, being not in formations, single units, two or three at a time. They didn't dare to come to real close quarters with the cavalry because we were compact and ready for them, but they kept the whole time and getting more and more numerous all the time.

[\(23:40\)](#):

Now, our withdrawal commenced was done in perfect order. One squadron of the cavalry dismounted, took up a defensive position, while the remainder went back in the direction of our camp. Then, when they'd gone some distance, the squadron which had dismounted, rejoined the main body and another squadron then took their place and it continued like this towards the camp, bit by bit by bit, different squadrons taking the defensive positions. When we were about, probably about three or four miles from our camp, it began to get very sticky indeed because you couldn't start to count the number of Arabs there were but they were all individual units, and so our casualties were comparably few and the mere numbers were very difficult **to call with**. Our officer was really splendid because the troops, our troops were all Indians remember. The Adjutant, a man called Collins, Captain Collins, he galloped about shouting, rally 33rd, rally 33rd.

[\(25:28\)](#):

This kept our squadrons still compact as real units without scattering. If they had scattered, it would've been a desperate position because there were so many of the Arabs, and then this was a position when suddenly, there broke out a sustained volume of small arms fire, completely astonishing us, astonishing the enemy, and what had happened was a British regiment had been sent out from our camp to meet our return, and they'd been so well disposed in the ground that neither the Arab nor ourselves were aware of them until this rifle broke out. Well, that was too much for the Arabs. They suddenly came upon a really disciplined force of infantry. Then they simply disappeared. Within, I suppose, 15 minutes, there was nothing but a departing cloud of dust as they all went off. Well, now it was time to see what had happened as a result of all this miles of going back and back and back. May I just see.

## PART 2

IWM [\(00:08\)](#):

Colonel Short, reel two.

HES [\(00:12\)](#):

But we now had to see what had happened after all this. So the British officers of the regiment, we all dismounted, walked over the ground shooting the wounded horses simply as a mercy act. That was all we could do about it before we returned to camp. Our casualties were comparatively few because of the fact that the Arabs didn't dare to attack the Cavalry which was massed with heavy firepower, you see? But we lost two valuable British officers. One was the machine gun officer who was killed defending his gun, and the other was one of the squadron commanders, both very badly missed when we next dined in our mess. They had to be buried, of course, next day.

[\(01:58\)](#):

There was now a lull after this engagement until the Turkish force decided to attack our position in Shaibah. And they pushed this attack quite vigorously. Even the operating table in the hospital tent came under fire. **Not purely casualty bullets, but there it was**. And fighting went on for about two days, three days, and they'd had enough and the Turks withdrew. The job now was to get all our casualties, sick and wounded, back to headquarters in Basra. Now the command in Basra had requisitioned large numbers of **bellums**, which are gondola-like boats, driven just by poling. Now, the country between Basra and Shaibah, quite unexpectedly had had the heavy rain, which you didn't really expect. And the whole of that country was now a shallow lake stretching for the 12 miles between Shaibah and Basra. So all the casualties, and the sick and wounded, were put into these **bellums** and, as senior medical officer to accompany them, I called myself Admiral, Admiral Unqualified, and we poled this, it must've been

about a hundred of these boats, this armada was poled back to Basra. Took hours and were met by an officer there who **opt. We don't know why it was** decorated.

(04:23):

Well, that finished. During this attack by the Turkish force, the cavalry was no longer used as cavalry. We were dismounted and just took part in the general defence as infantry as it lasted, about two days, three days. I was lying under a mulberry tree when my servant, a wonder soldier, brought me food there, quite **pleasantly** under fire, he didn't seem to mind and everything remained quiet after this attack now. About this time, it became obvious that so many problems were now arising that it was necessary to organize a central laboratory, staffed by officers of different kinds who were experts in different degrees, different things. And this was put under the command of Colonel Christophers, an officer of my service, Indian Medical Service, who was already a worldwide figure as a scientist. Do you want to know the names of some of the other officers? The other officers under Colonel Christophers were myself, Shortt, as protozoologist and malariologist; Bassett, a chemist; Stevenson, a bacteriologist; an entomologist, whose name I don't remember; and also a Turkish prisoner, who had been trained in Paris, and we utilised him in the laboratory as a bacteriologist

(07:36):

One minor task I had was a complaint by an officer in command of a detachment of Sikhs on the docks. These Sikhs were very disgruntled, worked badly. And when I spoke to the officer, he said, well, these men at home are accustomed to taking opium. It's almost just like smoking a cigarette for them. They can't get the opium here. So, I approached the officer in charge of supplies and said, I want some opium for this regiment, for this detachment. And he said, it's against orders to supply opium to anybody, but if you make out an indent for treacle, I'll see what I can do. So I made out an indent for treacle and in exchange got three quarters of a pound of opium – that problem settled. The next thing was to visit an isolation camp situated on the bank of the river opposite Basra. I went to examine this and found it composed of two very large tents under the sole command of a non-commissioned British sergeant.

(09:17):

And I found I probably had the only microscope in the force except anything in the British hospital. And I set to work to examine to these two tents, examined every man, had blood slides from him. I found a large number were suffering from relapsing fever, which was a spirochaetal disease. You could see it in the blood. And another lot, not so many, who were suffering from typhus, which is a much more dangerous disease. So I got the man to separate all the typhus cases into one tent, the relapsing fever cases, much more numerous, into the other. And I said, this arrangement must be maintained. On my next visit I was furious to find both tents equally inhabited. And I said, what have you done? You had my orders, keep 'em separate. He said, we were visited by a general and I told him what you had said about it and what my orders were. And he said, nonsense, he's only a junior officer, he doesn't know what he's talking about. So he had them all equally disposed in the two tents. What could you do? I reported the matter of course, but heard no more about it because I came on other duties.

(11:16):

At first, the central laboratory, we were dealing with ordinary military supplies, questions of food, the quality of the rice for the troops, quality of the military equipment, the uniforms and all that sort of thing. And a major part of our work was to carry out what we called malaria surveys. For this, as a malariologist, I had to travel all over the country of where the operations were going on or were going to go on. And there you collected at villages, towns in the country at each place all the children, which it could. I used to distribute sweets as a means of collecting all the children and each children examined each one separately to see whether it had an enlarged spleen or not, because the number of children

with enlarged spleens was an indication of the amount of malaria in that district. And this took you into villages, towns, everywhere.

[\(12:45\)](#):

Arabs, and marshes, were very interesting among the marsh Arabs. Now the Arabs living separately like that in the marshes and in the desert are noted for their hospitality. I came on a single hut in the marsh occupied by an Arab, his wife and some children. The hut was divided in the middle by a partition across the tent, it was a reed hut really. And behind this was a wife and some children. And the front where we went in, the Arab and I were together. We sat down on the floor and he offered me some food. Well, as he did this, through this partition, you couldn't see, but you could hear and be heard. And I heard one of the children say to the mother, will there be enough left for us afterwards? So I hastily said that I didn't require anything I'd already fed, but could hospitality go further than that? That's only, by the way. The central laboratory at first was located on a ship. We had the whole ship as a laboratory. It had previously been a research vessel in the Indian government. The crew remained on the ship. The officers were all in cabins, and we had the laboratories as well on the ship. When possible, we all dined together.

[\(14:50\)](#):

I gave you the composition of the lab. On one occasion, the entomologist was ahead of us and started off to have his dinner. He had one mouthful of soup and then he gave a grunt and he rushed out of the cabin to the rail of the ship and spat out this mouthful. So I called for the cook and I was told that the cook was not well, and he was behaving queerly. Colonel Christophers, our commander, now appeared, and we all went down to see this cook in his bunk. He was lying on a bunk, babbling away. I took hold of his hand with the idea of feeling his pulse. And without any hesitation, he leapt up off the bed, got his legs around my neck, had to be pulled off, and we had to actually tie him up. And we took him across the river, deposited him at the Indian military hospital, diagnosis unknown. When we returned to the ship, we visited his cabin, his bunk, and we found there some cubes of opium. And these are very similar to cubes of soup, which were issued in the rations. And we found that he had made the soup, himself probably under the influence from the opium cubes, but we couldn't have been poisoned because the first sip would've been so beastly, thing that was, and that was that. Next day he was returned to us very chastened, the chef.

[\(17:24\)](#):

But it was a funny end to our.....When the Turks got pushed back, beyond Baghdad and Mosul, life became rather dull because nothing was happening behind the front lines, except..... There was a dramatic episode happened in connection with the central laboratory. The staff, the lower-down staff were all Indians and they were very disgruntled because they said, why don't they send us back to our homes in India? The war is over, the Armistice is on. However, they weren't. And it led to more and more talk and eventually became a very nasty conspiracy. This conspiracy was that the British officers are all occupied, all located in the upper storey.

[\(19:02\)](#):

We must be sent to them. What we'll do is this. One night, we'll go up to the upper storey when the British officers are all asleep, they'll all be murdered and then the lab will be set on fire. This was low class Indian thinking and they said, there'll be no officer, there'll be no lab, surely then they send us back to our homes in India. But these people were on the lower floor. The upper floor was occupied by the British officers, with one exception. In a corner room of this upper floor, there was one member of the staff who was a Sikh. He occupied this room and, from the lower floor where these conspirators talked, a chimney led up into the corner room where the Sikh was, and by listening there, he could hear everything that was going on down below. He learned the whole thing, conspiracy to be carried out.

(20:33):

He told the commanding officer who informed the police, and the police managed to get an agent provocateur into the councils of the conspirators and that was, they were all arrested. Beyond that, I don't know. The name, it was a police matter after that, but that was what happened. But it could have been a very nasty thing indeed because it could have been done. Or concerning the Indian army at least where the Gurkhas were not concerned. Now, I had no connection with the Gurkhas here. All my military work was with the cavalry. But I happened to be visiting one day, a hospital ward where all the patients were Gurkhas. There was no accommodation for them, and they were distributed in rows on the floor, on their bedding. I couldn't think what was happening because these men, quite happy as Gurkhas generally are, were busily engaged, slapping themselves.

(22:08):

Further observation, I found they were killing flies and they were great gamblers, these Gurkhas. And I found that there was a competition going on. Each man beside him had a little heap of corpses, of flies, and the winner of the number of flies after a given time won the game. That's what they were doing. Now in the early days of the expedition, supplies were very limited before, I mean, before the whole thing got organized. And in one ward, the surgical ward I had charge of, there were no anesthetics available and all the minor operations I had to do without any anesthetic. You could only do things like extracting bullets from limbs and that sort of thing. And that was, they didn't seem to mind very much. They took it all very well.

(23:34):

Well, my story is more or less finished, but I don't know whether you want to hear some of the more amusing incidents. Well, I told you that the laboratory was on a ship at one time. One day, the entomologist, who in private life was a padre. One morning he appeared at the breakfast table in great distress and said, I can't have any breakfast. I said, what's happened? He said, my teeth. And he was in the habit of leaving his teeth in a mug of water at night and he woke, half awake, half asleep, took this mug of water and threw it, emptied it out of the porthole window. And he saw his teeth, his artificial teeth outlining against the sky going into the river.

(24:49):

That was his trouble. He spent the next day dredging, dredging for them without success. The other story, also amusing, is not exactly a drawing room story, but I may as well tell it to you. I think it's in the book as a matter of fact. In all the military stations where British troops were concerned, there used to be a more or less official brothel, which these men used. It was a sanitary measure because otherwise they'd have gone into the bazaar and got anything. Well, under this system, the brothel was carefully managed and the girls were regularly examined and so on. In the cantonment hospital, I won't mention where it was because then you could tell the regiment, but I had charge with the brothel as a medical officer. And one morning, when I got to the hospital, I was told there'd been a fracas and riot last night, the brothel was more or less attached to the hospital, one end.

(26:10):

And during the night, some soldiers got drunk and they chased one of these girls through the ward of the hospital, the middle of the night, making a nuisance. Well, you couldn't have that sort of thing going on. So I reported this matter to the officer commanding the troops, and he said, I can't have this sort of thing happening. I'll get hold of the men concerned. I thought no more about it. And some days afterwards, I got a letter in the morning, a note, asked me would I attend a parade of the regiment, of the company, there was a company strength there. I didn't know what for and, when I arrived, they were all drawn up and, in a long line, all the men seemed rather, a mood, they were silent. Then the

commanding officer said, I'm going to find the man responsible for this thing. He must be here. All the troops are paraded. And then he had this girl from the brothel, commanding officer, the girl and I walked down the line, these troops, and they were looking like this..... could hardly..... but of course nothing happened. She failed to identify anybody.

[\(28:01\)](#):

But that wasn't the whole story. Afterwards, I got a letter one morning, put on my table, and this is why I'd gone to the scene as commanding officer. This is a complaint, written by one of the girls, describing what had happened that night. And I made inquiries. I found it was quite an accurate account of what had happened. But the funny thing was the letter, the address at the top was the Bull Ring. We'll say **Banaras**, just for the sake of it, the Bull Ring, **Banaras**. And then, Dear sir, you are the commander of this brothel. We are entirely under your care. Nobody else is able to look after us and we look upon you to save us from this sort of behavior in future. Well, to that effect, I'm so sorry. I lost the letter. I've already read it. And it ended up Your obedient prostitute, Miriam. Well, that's all I have to say. A lot more, but I can't.

IWM [\(29:31\)](#):

Well, thank you very much.