

Charles William Brett – An Old Contemptible



Charles William Brett was born on Tuesday 24 July 1888, the only son of Charles & Annie Brett (nee Claridge) who were then living at 290 High Street, Watford, Hertfordshire. His father, who had been born in Sawbridgeworth, was to have a long and distinguished career in the Hertfordshire Police force, retiring as a Sergeant.

On Monday 8 February 1909, Charles, who by now was 20 years-old and working as a Fireman on the Great Eastern Railway, enlisted in the British army at Bishops Stortford, becoming a Trooper with the 16th (The Queens) Lancers, and being given the Regimental number L/1648. By 1910, he was stationed at Weedon Barracks, Northamptonshire, and it was here that he was to suffer some injuries. Firstly, he was kicked in his right thigh by a horse on 18 January. Then, on 26 July, he suffered a facial injury after a fall from a bicycle, which required a three day stay in hospital. Records show that by 1911, he was one of 153 members of the Regiment who were living in the barracks.



Weedon Barracks, Northamptonshire.

The Great War 1914-1918

In March 1914, the Regiment were stationed at The Curragh Barracks in Ireland, where they were involved in what was known as the Curragh incident, sometimes referred to as the Curragh mutiny. With Irish Home Rule due to become law in 1914, the British Cabinet contemplated some kind of military action against the unionist Ulster Volunteers who threatened to rebel against it. Many officers, especially those with Irish Protestant connections, of whom the most prominent was Hubert Gough, threatened to resign or accept dismissal rather than obey orders to conduct military operations against the unionists. Gough offered the officers under his command at the nearby Marlborough Barracks the choice of resignation, rather than fighting against the Ulster Volunteers. The ultimatum was passed on to the rest of Gough's 3rd Cavalry Brigade at the Curragh Camp, and on the evening of 20 March 1914, a telegram was sent to the War Office in London announcing that almost all the officers of 5th Lancers intended to resign and the same was true of 16th Lancers. The Army Council threatened to suspend any senior officer who had offered to resign, and ordered Gough and two of his colonels to report to the War Office. A second telegram confirmed that 57 officers preferred to accept dismissal, including Gough. At the time of the incident, 70 officers were serving with the 3rd Cavalry Brigade. The officers were not technically guilty of mutiny, as they had resigned before refusing to carry out a direct order. Although the Cabinet issued a document claiming that the issue had been a misunderstanding, the Secretary of State for War J. E. B. Seely and Chief of the Imperial General Staff Field Marshal Sir John French were forced to resign after amending it to promise that the British Army would not be used against the Ulster loyalists. The event contributed both to unionist confidence and to the growing Irish nationalist movement, convincing Irish nationalists that they could not expect support from the British Army in Ireland.

Following the outbreak of the First World War on 4 August 1914, the Regiment left Curragh on Friday 14 August, and made their way to Dublin, where they boarded the *S.S. Indian*, and undertook a two day journey to Le Harve, France. Upon their arrival on the Continent, the Regiment moved to bivouacs at Cousolre close to the Belgian border, moving to Fontaine-l'Eveque the following day. Here, they were involved in the defence of the city of Mons and by Wednesday 26 August 1914, were covering the British infantry retirement from Le Cateau.

The Regiment served continuously in both France and Flanders as part of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade with the 5th Lancers. Brigadier (later General) Gough, commanded the Brigade. Although there had been several men wounded due mainly to artillery fire, it would be on 28 August that they suffered their first death when 22 year-old Londoner, Private Charles Smith was killed in action. He is buried at Flavy-Le-Martel Communal Cemetery, France. By the end of the war, the Regiment would lose a total of 213 men killed in various theatres where it served, with many more wounded. No doubt Charles Brett saw a great number of his comrades lost on the battlefields.

On 15 September 1914, the Regiment came under the command of the 2nd Cavalry Division and spent much of its time on the move as they faced the onslaught of the German army. Renowned, locations such as Kemmel, Neuve Eglise, Hooge and Dickebusch are recorded in the unit war diaries. As the year drew to an end, and the opposing armies began to settle into entrenched positions along what would become known as the Western Front, the 16th Lancers found themselves bivouacked in the French village of Vieux-Berquin, between Hazebrouck and Armentières. It is here they would spend their first Christmas overseas. The Regiment remained in billets in Ypres until the 19 February 1915, when they went into the trenches. During the next two days the men were employed in improving and repairing trenches. Nothing particular happened except the usual shelling, from which there were several casualties, Lieutenant Thornton and three men being wounded and one man killed, Lance Corporal Isaac Frederick Wellbourn.

Disaster in the Trenches

Sunday 21 February 1915, was an unusually disastrous day for the Regiment. The enemy's trenches ran parallel to those of the Lancers, at a distance varying from 15 to 500 yards. In front of "D" Squadron was a deep ditch which ran from the German trench to that occupied by the Squadron. It had been suspected for some days that the enemy was running a sap at the bottom of this ditch, and a close observation had been kept on it, but no sign of anything of the sort had been discovered. It turned out afterwards that the Germans had run a sap half way down it, but had turned off at a sharp angle and continued the sap underground until it ran under the centre of the trench of "D" Squadron, where three mines had been placed at the end of it. It was afterwards ascertained from prisoners that the mines had been laid some days before the Lancers took over the trench, but that the explosion had been delayed with the intention of catching the relief when they were taking over on the 18th. However, the opportunity had fortunately been missed. At 6:00 a.m. on the 21st one mine was fired, followed immediately afterwards by the other two, with the result that the trench was completely destroyed. The enemy followed this up with a strong attack on the trenches on each side of that held by "D" Squadron. There was of course much confusion and a hand to hand combat, in which the enemy was finally driven back by "A" Squadron and the reserve troop of "D" with a machine gun. A counter-attack was made by the reserve troops. They were unable to regain the lost trench, and a request for help was sent to two companies of French Infantry, which were in support of the left section of the trench, but these refused to move without orders from their own Commanding Officer. When he came up he was unfortunately killed while giving the order to advance. No further attack was made until 9:00am that morning, when the line was reinforced by a squadron of the 20th Hussars and another Company of French infantry from the supporting line. The French were stopped at once by the heavy fire they were met with, all their officers and half their men being shot down in a few minutes. The Hussars got a little further when they were brought up, but enfilade fire stopped them and the attack was broken off. No further attempt was made to regain the lost trench, but a new one was dug in the rear of it. This was the worst day which the 16th Lancers had during the whole of the war. When the roll was called it was found that Major Neave, Captain Nash, Lieutenants. Beech, King and Cross, and seven men were killed, and Lieutenant Patrick and 29 men wounded. In addition Lieutenant Ryan and 11 men were missing, in all seven officers and 47 other ranks killed, wounded and missing.

The following soldiers were killed in this incident. The bodies of the Officers are buried in the Ypres Town Cemetery, whilst the bodies of the other ranks were not recovered and their names are recorded on the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres.

- Major Arundell Neave MID (Pictured)
- Captain Edward Radcliffe Nash
- Lieutenant Rowland Auriol James Beech
- Lieutenant David Ronald Cross MC MID
- Lieutenant Nathaniel Walter Ryder King
- Lance Serjeant Gilbert Percy Liggins
- Corporal George Annett
- Corporal Alfred Jackson
- Lance Corporal William Futrill
- Lance Corporal Sydney Leonard White
- Private Frederick Charles Adam
- Private Charlie Alderson
- Private Walter Oliver Basson
- Private Harold Cutfield
- Private William Henry Giles
- Private George Henry Jones
- Private Charles Alfred Lindsey



Major Arundell Neave MID



Lieutenant Rowland Auriol James Beech



16TH LANCERS	
LIEUTENANT CROSS D. R. M. C.	PRIVATE BASSON W. O.
SERJEANT DOCWRA F. McDERMOTT J. H.	BIRMINGHAM G. BRASHIER H. CARVER E. CONLAN P. COPSEY T. CROW A. CUTFIELD H. DAVISON T. GIBBONS J. P. GREINER C. W. H. HAGGER C. R. HUGHES J. JONES G. H. JORDAN A. A. KITCHEN W. LANGDALE W. LINDSEY C. A. LINFIELD J. MARTIN G. A. MEAD F. MITCHEAL J. NEWBORNE A. RAMSEY H. REDDING C. RETTIE G. A. STANDING A.
LANCE SERJEANT LIGGINS G. P.	STEPHENSON F. STRATFORD C. W. SYRETT H. WIEGOLD W. J.
CORPORAL ANNETT G. JACKSON A. MEWS W. J. TUDDENHAM R. T.	
LANCE CORPORAL BRYANT J. F. CHAPMAN H. H. D. C. M. FUTRILL W. HILL A. PARSONS E. G. STURDY R. TOPPLE W. H. WELLBOURN I. F. WHITE S. L.	
PRIVATE ADAM F. C. ALDERSON C. AXFORD F. R. BANNISTER R. J.	

This panel on the Menin Gate memorial commemorates all those members of the 16th (Queens) Lancers who have no known grave and are buried somewhere in the Ypres Salient.



On the 26 February 1915, the Regiment rejoined the 3rd Cavalry Brigade at Hazebrouck and went into billets, where it remained until the 23 April. The following day the Brigade returned, dismounted, to the trenches along the Canal north-west of Ypres, where they had their first experience of "stink shells," which fortunately proved more disagreeable than deadly, their chief effect being to produce temporary blindness. The Brigade were still in the trenches on 2 May 1915 at Wiltge, when they were first gassed and then attacked, but the enemy were driven back as the gas took effect, principally on the supports, who were obliged to vacate their shelters. The gas, for the most part, passed away on the flank of the 16th Lancers who suffered one man killed and one man wounded. A second gas attack was made on 24 May, and the 16th were sent up to Ypres, and whilst crossing the pontoon bridge from the sally-port in order to get to the trenches the Regiment was badly shelled by two guns which the enemy had trained on the bridge. Colonel Eccles, Lieutenant Lord Holmpatrick, and Captain Macglashan, the surgeon, and nine men were wounded and two killed before the troops could be withdrawn behind the shelter of the ramparts. When it was dark, the Regiment succeeded in crossing the bridge and marched via Zillebeke to Hooge Woods, where it took over the trenches of the 11th Hussars. The next two days were occupied in trench digging under continuous shelling, during which five men were killed and three wounded. On the 29 May the Regiment was relieved by the Blues and went back to Vlamertinghe and then to Ste. Marie Cappel. From this point the Regiment remained in reserve for much of the time, apart from occasional periods in the trenches as dismounted troops until 19 June 1916.

The Battle of the Somme

The Cavalry Corps took no part in the action during the Battle of the Somme, but were held in reserve. The only casualty which the 16th Lancers had during these months was when Captain Tempest Hicks was wounded. On 6 September 1916 the Regiment marched to Bray sur Somme, and eventually, on 8 November went into billets at Petits Preaux for the winter.

1917 – The End of the Fight



During January 1917 there was no serious fighting in the northern sector, though there were some minor local attacks made to rectify the line in several places. Charles Brett, home on leave at the time, married his sweetheart, Ellen Reed of Bishops Stortford, on Friday 19 January 1917 in Harpenden. Their first child, Ena, was born in Bishops Stortford on Saturday 6 October 1917.

After returning to France, Charles remained with the Regiment until Thursday 5 April 1917, when they marched from their billets and were employed in a reconnaissance of the enemy's line. Beyond some shelling, there was no actual fighting, but the weather was atrocious, with frequent snowstorms, and shelter was difficult to find as every village had been carefully destroyed. A few days later, on Monday 9 April 1917, the Battle of Arras began. It was on this day, as British troops headed towards the Hindenberg Line in a major assault, that Charles Brett was injured, after falling from his horse, causing a contusion on his back. He was evacuated to a British General Hospital at Camiers, and from there was transported to the Grange Street Hospital in Manchester. He was later moved to the Runnymede Hospital, Manchester, to assist his recovery.

Having returned to the United Kingdom on 22 April 1917, Charles would remain stationed at home, being no longer fit for overseas service. He was posted back to the Curragh barracks in Ireland, where he was engaged on training duties for the remainder of his service. On Sunday 16 March 1919 he was discharged from Army service. He underwent a medical examination on Thursday 30 October 1919, where he claimed he was suffering from the effects of his fall, and that he had contracted chronic bronchitis due to his service in France. It was determined by the army Medical Officer that he had no disability and no pension award was made.

Following his discharge from the Army, Charles was awarded three campaign medals, the 1914 Star (Mons Star) with Clasp & Rose, the British War Medal and the Victory medal.



Name	Corps	Rank	Regt. No.
BRETT	16 Lns	Pvt	1648
CW			
Medal	Dtd.	Page	Remarks
Victory	*		* Award to Superintendence when in Rtd.
14 Star	6/9/13	10	bl 24507
clasp No. 11 1843 C/A 265.20 clasp 4507			
Theatre of War first served in			
Date of entry therein 17-8-14			
68/12/1742. (14) R. 1308			

- **1914 Star (Mons Star)**

Awarded for service in France or Flanders (Belgium) between 5 August and 22 November 1914. A "5th AUG.-22nd NOV. 1914" clasp was instituted in 1919, together with a small silver rose. These were awarded to those who had served under fire or who had operated within range of enemy mobile artillery in France or Belgium during the period between 5 August and 22 November 1914.

- **British War Medal**

Awarded to both servicemen and civilians that either served in a theatre of war, or rendered service overseas between 5 August 1914 and 11 November 1918.

- **Victory Medal**

Awarded for service in any operational theatre between 5 August 1914 and 11 November 1918. It was issued to individuals who received the 1914 and 1914-15 Stars and to most individuals who were issued the British War Medal.



Having left the military, Charles joined the ranks of the Metropolitan Police Force on Monday 24 November 1919, and moved into a home at 8 Dean Street, Forest Gate, East London. A little over a year later, on Thursday 30 December 1920, a second daughter, Irene, was born to the couple. This was swiftly followed by their third and last child, Nelly, who was born the following year. At the time his parents were also living with the family, a tight fit in a small dwelling.

Sadly, Charles was invalided from the Metropolitan Police Force on Sunday 22 April 1934, and moved home to 9 Pipers Avenue, Harpenden. After a short period of casual employment he joined the Vauxhall Motor Company in Luton, where he worked until he was 65 years-old. Despite his age, he later worked at Luton Airport as a costing agent. He passed away in 1967.