

Charles Edward Buchanan Meredith

Rifleman

Singapore Volunteer Rifles



Charles Edward Buchanan Meredith has proven to be an enigmatic research subject. Born on the 21st of September 1890 in Kington, he was the youngest child of Henry and Lucy Meredith. There were five other children, four girls and an older brother Gwynne Henry Meredith. Gwynne will feature again later in this piece. Henry was the brother of James Meredith who ran the family ironmongers business from 3 High Street, Kington. He assisted James running the business but is also recorded as being a Draper. The family lived at 31 Duke Street, a relatively small house for such a large family. At some point between 1891 and the 1901 census Henry moved the family away from Kington and settled them in Surrey at 78 Beulah Road, Upper Norwood, Croydon. What the attraction was for a Kington born man to move his family to Croydon is unknown but the 1901 census informs us that Henry had retired and was living on his own means.

Sadly, in April 1905, when Charles was just 15, Henry died. His body was returned to Kington for burial where he was laid to rest, in Kington Cemetery, alongside his father-in-law, Doctor Charles Meteland. Henry was by today's standards a wealthy man. When probate was granted to his wife Lucy his estate amounted to £3720 15s 7d, today that would be somewhere in the region of £160,000. Henry provided well for his family and both Charles and his brother Gwynne attended the prestigious



Dulwich College as it is today

public school for boys, Dulwich College, on the outskirts of London. The College still operates to this day as an independent school, providing high class education for boys. Charles appears to have had a penchant for numbers and upon graduating from the College, in April 1908, he took a job at Commercial Union Insurance Company.

His brother Gwynne on the

other hand had a liking of words and when he graduated, became a solicitor. For whatever reason Gwynne emigrated to Canada and set up business in Victoria, British Columbia and it was here on the 18th March 1914 that he married Mary Capellan Sawyer, a girl who originated from his home patch of Upper Norwood, Surrey.

However, I digress, back to Charles the subject of this piece. Commercial Union moved Charles to their Singapore office in 1912. It was here, at the outbreak of war in 1914, that Charles joined the Singapore Volunteer Rifles as Rifleman Meredith. The Singapore Volunteer Corps had been established in 1854 to supplement the local constabulary and to enhance security during riots between Chinese Secret Societies. The volunteers were drawn from European residents and were led by serving British officers. Much the same as in 1854, the services of the volunteers were called upon to



quell riots during what is now known as the 1915, Sepoy Mutiny of Singapore. The mutiny occurred on the 15th February 1915 when unrest developed within the ranks of the 5th Native Light Infantry. The 5th Light Infantry, consisting mainly of Indian Muslims, had been despatched to Singapore from India, to relieve the permanent British contingent, the Yorkshire Light Infantry, whose services were required in France. The unit, consisting of some 400 Sepoy (Indian soldiers), had a grievance against their commanding officer, a



Lieutenant-Colonel E. V. Martin. Martin had been promoted from within the ranks of the regiment and did not inspire confidence or trust within the rank and file. They decided to use their grievance as the catalyst to overthrow British rule in Singapore but a more general aim of the mutiny was to get the British

out of their native country of India. The mutiny lasted seven days after which 47 British soldiers and local civilians were dead, Charles survived. It is also worth noting another Kington man, Harry Hamlet, was also involved in quelling the mutiny, while serving with the 1/4th Kings Shropshire Light Infantry. Harry died during fighting to repel the German Spring Offensive in April 1918.

It appears Charles was due some leave and in June 1915 he boarded the SS Shidzuoka Maru, at Yokohama, Japan and set sail for Victoria in British Columbia. Remember this is where Charles's brother Gwynne lived. The ship arrived on the 25th of June and Charles spent some time ashore with his brother and new wife Mary. He re-boarded and the following day the ship arrived in Seattle, Washington State where Charles disembarked and made his way across America to New York. Here he boarded the SS St Louis, and sailed for Liverpool arriving on the 15th of August 1915. The disembarkation ledger of the SS St Louis indicates that Charles intended living at the house of a Dr Underhill at Herne Hill, London. Herne Hill is just north of the family home in Croydon, on the outskirts of Central London. Sometime between August and October 1915 Charles underwent an operation after which he returned to Herne Hill. It was here that his health deteriorated and on the 10th of October 1915 Charles sadly died of pneumonia. His body was transported back to Kington where it arrived on the midday train from London on the 14th of October. Charles Edward Buchanan Meredith was buried that afternoon in the same grave as his grandfather, Dr Meteyard, and alongside his father Henry in Kington Cemetery. When Charles's probate was finalised, it confirmed that he was living at San Remo in Herne Hill and that he left all his money, £292 19s 3d, about £13000 now, to his brother Gwynne Meredith in Canada.

One might be forgiven for imagining that Charles had been injured during the Singapore Mutiny and returned to England for treatment. In fact, this was not the case. Dulwich College wanted to establish a record of all those Dulwich Boy's, "Old Alleynian's", who gave the ultimate sacrifice during the war. The details of Charles's death are revealed in a letter dated 15th October 1921 from his mother to the College, its purpose, to have her son's commitment and death remembered. A transcript of that letter is included below and provides valuable historical context for Charles Edward Buchanan Meredith.

15th October 1921

Dear Mr Christison,

I am sorry you have had so much trouble in finding me; the above is not my permanent address. I think in regard to my late son, I am not sure that you will think his name ought to have a place in the War Record, as his death can only be considered to be indirectly caused by the war, but perhaps you can judge after hearing some particulars.

On leaving Dulwich, Charlie entered the Commercial Union Insurance Co. with the idea of taking up Actuarial work, but as he had a great desire to go abroad, he changed into the fire department and was eventually, at the age of 21 in 1912, given an appointment at Singapore. Here he got on splendidly and was soon even trusted to transact business in various parts of the Malay States: Sumatra, Java, Borneo [etc.?], as he had a great deal of interest and liked responsibility. He had joined the Singapore Maxim Gun Co. when he first went out, and in this he was very keen, as he was in everything he took up. When the Indian Soldiers mutinied in the Spring of 1915, the Maxim Gun Company was the first upon the scene and took an important part in the bloody struggle that took place – for a week afterwards the Company were about in the jungle day and night searching for stray snipers, during which time they had very bad & insufficient food.

So, when my dear boy got his leave and came home shortly afterwards, he complained of not feeling well. However, he was anxious to join up and hoped to obtain a commission, but before anything necessary for him to have a little operation to his nose, and also for adenoids. This he got over very well and to all appearance had finally recovered, when erysipelas set in, followed by pneumonia and in a few days all was over. He had grown a fine man, 6 ft I think, but not over weight though he had always had good health and had stood the climate of Singapore well for over these years – no mother ever had a more loving son and he never failed to write home every week, letters full of interest often with photographs of the places and people whom he had seen.

I could send you a photograph, but will wait your reply, as you may not consider my boy gave his life for his country, although he offered it.

Yours sincerely

L.A. Meredith

I may add that as soon as war was declared, the Singapore Maxim Gun Co. was mobilised and Charlie was on duty altogether and was one of those who guarded the German prisoners, and this, in the heat of the day with no shelter, was a pretty onerous task.

Lucy's impassioned letter clearly shows the pride and love she had for her son. Even after his death she remained determined his service should be remembered. It is clear that same pride and love was evident in Kington, when she advanced his name for inclusion on Kington War Memorial.

Charles's death and burial are reported in the 16th of October edition of the Kington Times which records that at the time of his death, Charles was a Captain in the Singapore Territorials. No records of his military career exist, no records of medals issued exist and he is not even recognised by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Charles may not have died in battle but his death is remembered on both Kington War Memorial and Leominster Roll of Honour. He was also remembered on a memorial plaque at Christ Church, Gipsy Hill, Croydon, where it is thought the family worshipped. However, the plaque and most of the church was destroyed in a huge fire in 1982. It appears tragedy still seems to follow Charles to this day.



Charles was reunited with his father in 1915 and in 1932 his mother was also interred with them. As for Gwynne, well he may have financially benefited from his brother's death but sadly he was never to see his brother again after that fleeting reunion in Victoria, British Columbia.