

# Charles Scutchings

Sergeant 38517, 52nd Battery, 15th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery



Photograph from the Buckinghamshire Examiner

Charles Scutchings was born in Little Missenden in 1887 to Charles and Rose Scutchings. He was also known as Charlie or Charley and was named Charley in the index to the register of births. Additionally sometimes Scutchings is recorded as Scotchings (as on the Medal Index card and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission entry).

In the 1891 Census Charley was living with his father Charles, who was a widower, and three sisters: Lilly aged 9, Rose aged 7 and Daisy aged 2. His father was a groom, and the family were living at 17 Slater Street, High Wycombe. Rose Scutchings had died in 1889.

The 1901 Census records Charley aged 14, a servant, and his father, who had remarried. He married Emma Caroline Pett in 1895. Charley had a half-brother, Harold (1) and the family lived in Little Missenden. Charley Scutchings cannot be found in the 1911 Census but his father was still living in Little Missenden.

Charley enlisted in London in the Royal Field Artillery. He had been working in Yorkshire for Sir Reginald and Lady Graham of Norton Conyers, Melmerby, Ripon. There is a record of Charles Scotchings having married Margaret A. Gray in 1915 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Charles and Margaret must have married while Charles was home on leave from France.

Charles Scutchings joined the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery, which was a unit of Britain's pre-war regular army, very soon after war was declared. He would have been aged 26. The Medal Index Card below gives a qualifying date, the date he entered a theatre of war, as 19/8/14. The 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade went to France in August 1914 as part of the British Expeditionary Force under the command of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division. Charles's Medal Index card states that he was a driver. His brigade was part of the horse-drawn RFA, responsible for 18-pounder guns and 4.5 inch howitzers deployed close to the front line and capable of being moved about as necessary in support of the infantry.

Campaign :— 1914		(A) Where decoration was earned.	
		(B) Present situation.	
Name	Corps	Rank	Reg. No.
(A) SCOTCHINGS	15 <sup>th</sup> Bde RFA	DVR	33517
(B) Charles	"	*Sgt	"
Action taken		D of W	
Clasp 2/2922			
QUALIFYING DATE.		19/8/14	
(6 34 48) W234—HP5590 500,000 4/19 HWV(P240) K608		[OVER]	

The Medal Index Card (from ancestry.co.uk) of Charles Scutchings shows that he was a driver in the RFA and was promoted to Sergeant later.

It also shows that he was awarded the 1914 Star with clasp.

The brigade was the basic tactical unit of the RFA of the British Army and it was divided into batteries of just under 200 artillerymen. Charles would have been one of 70 drivers in his battery, riding and caring for a pair of horses and their harness. Keeping them clean, well-fed, sound and healthy was no light task, especially in heavy mud. Wagon-loads of stores and equipment had to accompany the battery to keep it functioning and these would be drawn by heavier horses than the guns. When the war started one ammunition column numbering 158 soldiers per Brigade had the task of keeping the guns supplied. Each of the 6 guns in a Battery was hitched to a two-wheeled limber containing the necessary equipment to serve the gun and this was normally drawn by a team of 6 horses with three men, each mounted on the off-side one of his pair. Each 18-pounder gun would have a minimum of 1,000 rounds of ammunition while the howitzers had 800 rounds. The howitzer was designed to fire projectiles with steep angles of ascent and descent, so that targets behind a barricade or in a trench could be hit. At the beginning of the war the quick-firing 18-pounder, in use since 1905, mostly fired shrapnel in the form of 375 balls per shell, and was designed to cut swathes through troops or cavalry. High-explosive shells for use against barbed wire and trenches were developed later, but when the battle of the Somme began only a quarter of 18-pounder shells were of the new type. Under ideal conditions a rate of fire of 30 shells per minute could be achieved.

The guns were served by 75 Gunners and 11 Bombardiers and each battery also had on its strength 2 saddlers, 2 wheelers, 4 shoeing-smiths plus a Corporal, and a Farrier-Sergeant, which gives some idea of the constant maintenance required for the guns to do their work.

The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battery was mobilised on 4 August at Kildare, landing at Le Havre on the 19th. Charles fought in the first major battle of the war, the Battle of Mons, 23 -24 August 1914. The War Diary<sup>1</sup> entry for 26 August laconically gives a glimpse of what was entailed in covering a retreat: "Survivor: withdrew from the disabled guns, carrying most of the wounded. The infantry in front had all gone, German infantry being some 400-500 yards in front with machine-guns." On the 29<sup>th</sup> there was some respite, with the 52<sup>nd</sup> awaiting new guns and wagons and the other 2 batteries each being reorganised with 4 guns instead of the normal 6. The horses were said to be "very tired and man need bullets extracting. Spirit of men excellent."

Horse-drawn artillery had been part of the army for hundreds of years, but by October the commanders had to reckon with an entirely new threat: "All wagons, guns and horses concealed as far as possible from aeroplanes." That month the 52<sup>nd</sup> was fighting in the Bèthune and Festubert areas, later moving to Neuve Eglise and Messines as part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division. In January 1915 they transferred temporarily to the 27<sup>th</sup> Division at Dickebusch and noted on 27 January "this being the Kaiser's birthday all batteries are in action."

<sup>1</sup> WO 95/1528/1 at The National Archives

Like the infantry they supported, they rotated in and out of the front line, providing targeted fire to disrupt the enemy's activities, attempting to cut ~~we~~ with their shells and to lay down intensive fire before an advance and a creeping barrage during it. They might have to dash off at very short notice to reinforce hard-pressed infantry. In between times cat and mouse tactics meant that artillerymen on both sides were constantly seeking to conceal their own guns while precisely registering those of the enemy and in attempting not to be where they were thought to be when enemy bombardment started.

By March they were in the Messines area tasked with registering new trenches ready for night firing and In May the batteries were having difficulties with telephone communications near Ypres. The sector remained fairly quiet for some months.

The start of the following year found them enduring very harsh conditions around Montigny, Bussy and Argoeuves. Despite the lengthening sick-lists they laboured to build roads and standings for their guns and horses. On 25 Feb 1916 they moved to Beauval along very slippery roads, proud that the march had been accomplished without losing any horses despite many falls. The unfortunate horses then had to stand outside in 6 inches of snow. 'Taken on the whole', records The War Diary, 'the worst day since the beginning of the campaign. Men still wonderfully cheery.'

From March, as part of VI Corps, they were in action, originally near Arras at Scarpe. In July they were in reserve at 3 hours' readiness to move and on 19 July were involved in the battle of the Somme, near Marlborough Wood and Waterlot Farm, under the command of 7<sup>th</sup> Division of Artillery. In August they twice suffered casualties and the loss of a gun through shells exploding prematurely in the breach. On the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> they were the target of 'gas shells throughout the night, making things very uncomfortable.' When they were finally withdrawn from action on 30 September the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade calculated that they had lost on the Somme 19 killed and 130 wounded, which included both officers and other ranks.

Charley clearly was involved in a great deal of action during the two years of his army service and had won promotion to Sergeant. He was wounded in action and died of his wounds on 10 September 1916 aged 29, one of so many casualties of the Battle of the Somme.

An announcement in the Buckinghamshire Examiner dated 6 October 1916, under the heading 'Little Missenden', states:

'Mr Charles Scutchings of Holmwood Terrace, Amersham, informs us of the death on active service of Sergt Charles Scutchings (late of Little Missenden) of the 5<sup>th</sup> Battery Royal Field Artillery. Sergt. Scutchings died on 10<sup>th</sup> September in France. He had served 6 years with the colours. In this war he fought through Mons and had generally passed safely through some of the most severe engagements during his two year in France. The narrow escapes the deceased had may be judged by the fact that he had four of his horses killed at various times.'

There is a notable inconsistency about the length of time Charles spent in the army. The time of six years does not fit with any other evidence we have so far been able to discover. Yet serving in the artillery required technical skills in addition to the basic requirements of soldiering, so for Charles to be moved to the front with a regular unit so soon after joining the army suggests that he had some previous military experience, and this may help to explain why he did not appear in the 1911 Census.

A potentially more serious discrepancy is that the newspaper states he belonged to the 5<sup>th</sup> Battery of the RFA, which does exist. However, the only official records we can access all place him in the 52<sup>nd</sup> battery of the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade. For most of the two years Charley Scutchings served this formed part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division of Artillery, so perhaps that is how the confusion arose.

The last known address of his widow, Mrs Margaret Scutchings, was 37 Station Street, Walker, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Amongst the letters received by Mrs Scutchings, expressing sympathy was

one from Lady Graham (the former employer of Charles) who wrote from Norton Conyers, Melmerby, Ripon.

Dear Mrs Scutchings

I write for Sir Reginald and myself to express our deep sympathy with you on the loss of your husband, one of the best men I ever knew and one we had high regard for. He always did his duty. I remember well that he started to join the army at once, not even waiting a day, although I knew he was sorry to give up his place and leave us. Your consolation must be that he was a splendid soldier and gave his life for his country. I wish that you could have been with him, but even had that been allowed you could not have arrived in time to see him alive. He died a hero and the best death a man could have.

Yours sincerely,

A.M.Graham<sup>2</sup>

He was awarded The Allied Victory Medal, The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The 1914 Star.

His name appears on the memorial plaque in St John the Baptist Church, Little Missenden.

Charles Scutchings is remembered with Honour and buried in  
La Neuville British Cemetery, Corbie, Somme, France  
Grave reference II.D.10



La Neuville British Cemetery, Courtesy: Commonwealth War Graves Commission

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<sup>2</sup> The author was in contact with a great-niece of Charley Scutchings who told what she knew of the family and confirmed the facts already researched.