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The Cross of Sacrifice
Imphal War Cemetery

A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

COLONEL W. D. CHURCHER

A concise biography of Colonel Walter Donald CHURCHER, an officer in the British Army from 1915 until 1918 when he transferred to the British Indian Army. He served with the British Indian Army from 1918 until 1947, being seriously injured whilst serving in Malaya in 1942.
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A Concise Biography of Colonel W. D. CHURCHER

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Colonel Walter Donald CHURCHER

Colonel Walter Donald CHURCHER was an officer in the British Indian Army between 1915 and 1947, having originally commissioned in the Territorial Force of the British Army in 1914. He joined the East Surrey Regiment before transferring to an infantry regiment in the Indian Army, but later transferred to the Indian Army Service Corps.

CHURCHER held a variety of staff roles before becoming the Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport for III Indian Corps in Malaya in 1941. He was severely injured and placed on the last hospital ship to leave Singapore before the island surrendered to the Japanese. On recovering sufficiently from his wounds, he served for the rest of the war in India.



Family Background

Walter Donald CHURCHER was born in Middlesex, England, on 13 July 1893, the eldest son of Walter CHURCHER and his wife Alice. His father was a solicitor and, in 1901, they lived at 1 Heathcote Villas, Heathcote Road, in the St. Margarets area of Twickenham, London. He had a younger brother, Alec Geoffrey, born in 1901. Walter was educated at Cheltenham College, where in 1911 he was a boarder living with fifteen other boys at Newick House, Upper Bath Road, Cheltenham, under the supervision of a schoolmaster. By this date, Walter's mother had died, so his father had moved to live Walter's grandmother and two aunts in Hampstead, London.

First World War

The outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 found twenty-one-year-old Walter CHURCHER studying at Cambridge University. While at Cambridge, he had joined the Cambridge University Officer Training Corps in October 1912 as a Cadet. Therefore, with the United Kingdom declaring war on Germany, he was mobilised with the 5th Battalion, The East Surrey Regiment on 29 August 1914. This was a Territorial Force unit based in and around Wimbledon, in what is now South-West London. He was granted a commission in the Territorial Force in the rank of Second Lieutenant with effect from the date of his mobilisation.

The 5th Battalion duplicated to form the 1st/5th Battalion, and 2nd/5th Battalion; with CHURCHER staying with the 1st/5th Battalion. This unit was part of the Surrey Brigade in the Home Counties Division. On 29 October 1914, the 1st/5th Battalion embarked at Southampton with the rest of the division, bound for India. The battalion landed at Bombay on 2 December 1914, and shortly afterwards the division was split up with units being posted across India. The 1st/5th Battalion was posted to the Allahabad Brigade in the 8th (Lucknow) Division. In August 1915, the battalion transferred to the Nowshera Brigade in the 1st (Peshawar) Division.

On 5 November 1915, CHURCHER transferred from the East Surrey Regiment to the Indian Army on probation, joining the Indian Army Reserve of Officers.¹ He was attached to an Indian infantry regiment serving in India, the 31st Punjabis, between 21 November 1915 until 16 April 1916. He received promotion to the rank of Acting Captain with effect from 21 November whilst commanding a company in that regiment. Then on 16 April 1916, he transferred to another Indian infantry regiment, the 24th Punjabis, where again he served as a company commander. He served with that regiment for a total of one-hundred and seventeen days. On 5 August 1916, he was attached to another Indian infantry regiment, the 1st/69th Punjabis, until 15 November.

CHURCHER received orders to move overseas to Mesopotamia, where he arrived on 16 November 1916.² On 27 November 1916, he was attached to the 67th Punjabis, which was an infantry battalion on operational service in the theatre. On 31 March 1917, he was appointed Adjutant of the battalion in the rank of Acting Captain, which he remained in post until 10 July 1917. He then returned to regimental duties with the same battalion. This pattern of service in a higher rank while commanding a company was typical of this period in the Great War, due to the expansion of the British Army and Indian Army during the war. On 29 September 1917, he again assumed command of a company until 12 January 1918. He remained with the battalion until 9 August 1918, when he returned to the Depot in India.

¹ His personal file gives the date of his transfer as 5 November, with 61 November appearing in the London Gazette. The date given in his personal file is the preferred date of his transfer.

² Mesopotamia is now part of the modern country of Iraq, but at the time of the Great War, it was part of the Ottoman Empire.

Transfer to the Indian Army and Between the Wars

CHURCHER decided to seek a career in the Indian Army, and following a successful application, CHURCHER gained a permanent commission in the Indian Army in the rank of Lieutenant with effect from 16 August 1918.³ He had served three years and three-hundred and fifty-two days with the Territorial Force. On the same date, he began a period of service at the Depot of the 67th Punjabis, where he was to serve for two-hundred and forty-three days, i.e., until 15 April 1919. Between 15 April 1919 and 15 October 1920, CHURCHER was the officiating commanding officer of the Depot. On 15 October 1920, he returned to the regiment as an officiating company commander. He was posted on 3 February 1922, to the 3rd Indian Infantry Brigade at Peshawar as officiating Staff Captain. He relinquished that post on 5 September 1922.

In 1922, the Indian Army reorganised its infantry regiments as a result of the experience of the First World War. It had been found that single battalion regiments did not have sufficient resilience, so the Commander-in-Chief decided to merge regiments into twenty multi-battalion infantry regiments. In the reorganisation, the 67th Punjabis became the 1st Battalion 2nd Punjab Regiment. In consequence of these mergers, some new regiments had an excess of officers, so several officers had to find new regiments or corps within the Indian Army.

CHURCHER was one of the officers who decided to transfer to another corps, moving to the Indian Army Service Corps with effect from 6 September 1922, and became the Officer Commanding No. 1 Base Supply Section at Peshawar.⁴ Just a month later, CHURCHER was appointed the officiating Deputy Assistant Director of Transport at Peshawar. Forty-seven days later, he resumed his previous appointment commanding the No. 1 Base Supply Section (B.S.S.). For seven months between February and September 1923, CHURCHER was officer command 64 B.S.S. at Dargai in the North West Frontier. He then spent three months at the Indian Army Service Corps training establishment at Rawalpindi.

On 4 May 1923, CHURCHER was promoted to the rank of Captain, which was ante-dated to 29 May 1919. He was granted a period of home leave on 6 February 1924, which lasted for two-hundred and sixty-five days, therefore, CHURCHER did not return to India until 27 October 1924. On his return to India, CHURCHER joined the No. 14 District Supply Company, but transferred to No. 5 District Supply Company and later No. 17 District Transport Company.

On 6 September 1925, CHURCHER was confirmed in the Indian Army Service Corps, and on 7 December that year, he was posted as an instructor to the Indian Army Service Corps Training Centre. His first staff appointment was as a Deputy Assistant Director of Transport in the Rawalpindi District in India, which he assumed on 25 July 1926.

³ His seniority dated from 29 May 1916, which was important in terms of his prospects for advancement in the Indian Army as promotion was based on an officer's seniority.

⁴ CHURCHER's seniority dated from 29 May 1916, and his Indian Army number post 1922 was 541/IA

The Rawalpindi District was a first-class district, so doubled as the embryonic 1st Indian Division. Captain CHURCHER reported to Brevet Colonel E. M. STEWARD, O.B.E., who was the Assistant Director of Supplies and Transport for the district. CHURCHER remained in this role until 20 July 1930, i.e., nearly four years which was the usual period in a staff role. On completion of this posting, the Army granted him another period of leave, which was a combination of privilege leave and other leave, allowing him to embark on a U.K. bound ship on 24 July 1930 to see his family. He was home for one day short of a year, returning to India on 20 April 1931. He spent a spell as an Embarkation Supply Officer at Karachi, India, from 20 April 1931 until 19 April 1934. This role was based at the major port of Karachi, and it involved managing the shipping of personnel and equipment between India and the United Kingdom. During this appointment, CHURCHER received promotion to the rank of Major on 19 May 1933.

CHURCHER's next appointment was an operational one, serving with the 14th Motor Transport Company at Quetta, from 20 April 1934. He assumed command of the company on 30 April and remained in this post for nine months. On 26 January 1935, CHURCHER was posted to the Quarter-Master-General's Branch at Army Headquarters (A.H.Q.), at Delhi, but moved appointments quickly as on 22 February, he became an officiating Deputy Assistant Director of Transportation in India.⁵ He gained this post permanently between 2 September 1935 and 22 October 1936. After that, he served in Southern Command; as officiating officer commanding the 13th I.M.T. Section, and then attached to an infantry battalion, the 3rd Bn. 8th Punjab Regiment.

Major CHURCHER attended the Senior Officer's School at Belgaum between 9 April and 4 July 1937. This school provided courses for officers selected to command infantry battalions, artillery regiments, engineer, signals and supply companies. A period of three months compassionate leave followed until 28 January 1938. On his return, CHURCHER was posted to the 9th District Supply Company, based at Bangalore in southern India.

During the period from 1 April 1937 until 31 March 1938, the Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport (D.D.S.T.) of Southern Command (to whom CHURCHER reported), completed his Annual Confidential Report. The D.D.S.T. stated:

This officer has only served under me during the period of this report for 2 months. I have however known him for several years. He is a good type of officer and can always be relied on to make a success of any duty he may be called upon to perform. His knowledge of all Corps duties is extensive. He is popular with all ranks and sets a good example. His powers of command are good – his judgement is sound. He is zealous and energetic and of sober habits. I classify him as High average. He is coming to me as A.S.T. and I shall be very glad to have him.

⁵ It is not known where he was based as D.A.D.T., but it may be at A.H.Q..

At the time of this report, Walter CHURCHER's wife and family were living at 34, Cutcliffe Grove, Bedford, England. Indeed, as the confidential report suggested, CHURCHER was appointed the Assistant Director of Transportation in Southern Command, India, on promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, with effect from 28 August 1938. He continued in this role as the build-up to the Second World War commenced. This included another period of leave between 4 December 1938 and 3 February 1939.

The Second World War

The outbreak of the Second World War in Europe did not have a significant impact in India, other than that the Army in India was required to mobilise divisions for service in the Middle East. CHURCHER continued in his role as Assistant Director of Transport in Southern Command, and on occasions officiated as the Assistant Director of Supplies as well as his own role. On 1 October 1940, he transferred to the 7th Indian Infantry Division at Attock in the North West Frontier, to act as the Commander, Royal Indian Army Service Corps responsible for the supply and transport for the formation. The 7th Indian Division, based in the North West Frontier Province, was not designated for services overseas, so was frequently robbed of personnel and units to reinforce other formations that were due imminently for service overseas. This happened to Lieutenant Colonel CHURCHER, so on 16 March 1941, he transferred to 8th Indian Infantry Division at Meerut, which was preparing to move to the Middle East.

An indication of the scale of the expansion of the Indian Army at this time is evident as just over a month later, CHURCHER was on the move again. This time he was appointed the Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport for the new III Indian Corps being formed in Malaya. His appointment was with effect from 27 April 1941, and on the same day he was promoted to the rank of Acting Colonel. He embarked for Malaya on the same date and arrived on 11 May. En-route to Malaya, his promotion to the substantive rank of Colonel was announced with effect from 8 May 1941. CHURCHER went to Kuala Lumpur where the new corps headquarters was being established under Lieutenant General Lewis Macclesfield HEATH. The main port of entry for supplies to Malaya was Singapore, so all men and materiel had to be transported by rail and road to the forward units.

The corps assumed command of the 9th and 11th Indian Infantry Divisions stationed in northern Malaya with responsibility for the defence of the airfields there, as well as the general defence of Malaya against Japanese aggression. The Japanese attacked Malaya on 8 December 1941, with III Indian Corps taking the initial shock of the two pronged attack. The Japanese outflanked the positions held by III Indian Corps, and the corps began to retreat down the Malayan peninsula. The main battles were at:

- Jitra (8 – 12 December 1941),
- Kampar (30 December 1941 – 2 January 1942),
- Slim River (6 – 8 January 1942),
- Gemas and Muar River (14 – 22 January 1942).

During the latter battle, III Indian Corps played a minor role as it was in reserve having suffered serious losses in personnel and equipment. On 29 January 1942, Colonel CHURCHER was seriously injured by enemy action, suffering a major wound to his legs and lower body. He was evacuated to Singapore, and he was placed on what turned out to be the last hospital ship to leave the island, the M.V. Empire Star, which left Singapore in the early hours of 12 February 1942. The ship was commanded by Captain Selwyn N. CAPON, O.B.E. and was escorted by H.M.S. Durban and H.M.S. Kedeh.⁶ On board the Empire Star were over two-thousand, one hundred people, including naval, army and air force personnel, wounded and their nurses, and men, women and children evacuees.

Japanese aircraft attacked the ship at about 9.10 am, as she cleared the Durian Strait. Six dive-bombers attacked the ship, and two were hit by the anti-aircraft fire the three ships put up in their defence. The Japanese persisted, and three bombs hit the Empire Star, killing fourteen people and severely wounding another seventeen. Despite further attacks, the Empire Star reached Batavia, and later sailed on for India.

Whilst aboard the Empire Star, CHURCHER had to be operated on to amputate his leg as it was too badly damaged and infected. Three days after the Empire Star left Singapore, the island was surrendered to the Japanese. On arrival eventually in India, CHURCHER was admitted to hospital, and underwent two further operations on this leg. He was given an artificial leg, but preferred using a 'peg leg' as he found it more comfortable, which his family remember well. Colonel CHURCHER was Mentioned in Despatches on 19 December 1946 in recognition of his gallant and distinguished services in Malaya in 1942.

The severity of his injuries meant that CHURCHER did not return to duty until 26 November 1942, when he commenced light duties. On 27 December 1942, he was given his first appointment since recuperation as an instructor at the Royal Indian Army Service Corps School and Kakul. On 1 April 1943, CHURCHER was appointed the commanding officer of the Animal Transport Centre and Records at Jullundur. He retained his substantive rank of Colonel. His health continued to cause problems, and he was admitted to the British Military Hospital at Jullundur on 25 September 1944, and then transferred to the 40th British General Hospital at Poona for further treatment.

He resumed command of the Animal Transport Centre and Records on 1 May 1945, some eight months later. He was granted war leave for fourteen days from 17 September until 1 October 1945. By this date, hostilities with Japan had ended, with effect from 15 August, although the official surrender was not signed until 2 September.

⁶ Captain CAPON was awarded the C.B.E. for his skilful handling of his ship and his leadership in guiding the Empire Star from Singapore to safety. He later lost his life when the Empire Star was sunk in 1943.

Post War and Retirement

With the end of the war, CHURCHER continued in his current role. He was granted another period of war leave between 24 June and 22 July 1946. On 16 December 1946, CHURCHER wrote to the Military Secretary at General Headquarters, Delhi, questioning whether he would be eligible for wound pension as he was permanently graded as Category C in terms of service due to his injury sustained in Malaya. This letter was in response to the first notification he had received by letter of the intention to compulsorily retire him from the Indian Army in light of the forthcoming partition of British India. As a consequence of his letter, CHURCHER was examined by a medical board, who confirmed his injury and eligibility for a wound pension.

The partition of British India scheduled was for 1948, but then on 3 June 1947, Lord MOUNTBATTEN (the Viceroy of India) announced publically that partition creating the independent nations of India and Pakistan would in fact take place on 15 August 1947. This accelerated the run-down of the British Indian Army, as most officers were not required to continue to serve in the new Indian or Pakistani Armies, so faced compulsory redundancy.

Colonel CHURCHER received his letter, dated 6 May 1947, confirming his retirement on the grounds of there being no further employment available for him when he vacated his current employment on or after 15 April 1947. He was granted eight months' leave preparatory to his retirement. He left the Animal Transport Centre and Records at Jullundur, and was struck off strength of the Indian Army on 6 May 1947, when he embarked for the United Kingdom.

Family and Death

Walter Donald CHURCHER returned to the United Kingdom, and he and his wife settled in Ashstead, Surrey, where they had bought a bungalow. Together they had five children. Colonel Walter Donald CHURCHER died on 9 February 1971, aged seventy-seven years.

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