

2021

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A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

BRIGADIER W. P. B. ASHTON

A concise biography of Brigadier William Proctor Bell ASHTON, C.B.E., M.C., B.Sc. (Eng), A.M.I.Mech.E., an officer in the British Army between 1916 and 1956, who served for the last eight years of his career in Pakistan, establishing the post-Partition Pakistan Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

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A Concise Biography of Brigadier W. P. B. ASHTON

Version: V1_1
This edition dated: 26 September 2021
ISBN: Not yet allocated.

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Published privately by: The Author – Publishing as:
www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk

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Brigadier William Proctor Bell ASHTON, C.B.E., M.C., B.Sc. (Eng), A.M.I.Mech.E.

Introduction

Brigadier W. P. B. ASHTON was an engineer in the British Army, who commenced his career in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, and specialised in the repair, maintenance, and upkeep of the increasing range of electrical and mechanical items in use with the British Army, including vehicles, small-arms, and radio equipment.

Fate decreed that he was posted to Malaya in 1941, and he became a prisoner of war of the Japanese with the surrender of Singapore on 15 February 1942. After over three long years of captivity, he returned to the U.K., but in early 1948, he was posted to Pakistan to assume responsibility for the establishment of the Pakistan Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, post-Partition, in a similar manner to the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers in the British Army. ASHTON was to remain in Pakistan for eight years, after which he retired from the British Army.

Family Background

William Proctor Bell ASHTON was born on 23 August 1897, in Carlisle, Cumberland. He was the eldest son of William ASHTON (1871 – ?) and his wife Mary Jane ASHTON (nee BELL) (1874 – ?). William ASHTON (senior) had been born in Cardiff, Glamorgan, and he became a teacher. By 1901, he had moved from Cardiff to be the headmaster of a school at Hunningham, Warwickshire. He and his wife had eight children, namely:

- William Proctor Bell ASHTON (1897 – 1981)
- Agnes Isobel ASHTON (1900 – ?)
- Elesa Ruth ASHTON (1903 – ?)
- Elizabeth ASHTON (1906 – ?)
- Arthur Gwilym ASHTON (1907 – 1980)
- Mary Gwynneth ASHTON (1909 – 2002)
- Ronald ASHTON (1911 – 1990)
- Betty ASHTON (1911 – 1974)

William (junior) and Agnes were born in Carlisle, while the others were born in Warwickshire.¹ It appears that William and his siblings were educated at their father's school.

¹ The Ancestry family tree for William ASHTON has his third child, Elesa, also being born in Carlisle, but the 1901 Census has the family living in Warwickshire.

Enlistment in the Army and the First World War

With the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, ASHTON was just short of his seventeenth birthday. He enlisted on 2 June 1916, and the next day, he was mobilised in the Territorial Force. He was still too young to serve abroad, so he served in the United Kingdom with the Welsh Regiment.² Commissioned in the rank of Second Lieutenant, ASHTON was posted to the 15th Battalion, The Welsh Regiment. He was deployed to France, where he arrived on 9 August 1918, just short of his twenty-first birthday.

The Great War was reaching a conclusion, although ASHTON and his compatriots were not to know that hostilities were to cease in three months' time. The 15th (Service) Battalion (Carmarthenshire), The Welsh Regiment had been formed in October 1914 by the Carmarthenshire County Committee. The battalion was part of the 114th Brigade in the 38th (Welsh) Division, and it had been serving in France and Flanders since December 1915. This division was part of the 3rd Army, and at the time was serving on the Somme Front. The first battle ASHTON was involved in was the Battle of Havrincourt, which commenced on 12 September 1918. This was the beginning of a series of battles leading to the Allied advance towards the Hindenburg Line. The 38th Division was involved in the Battles of Epehy, Bearevoir, and then the Battle of Cambrai in which it captured Villers-Outreaux. The final advance into Picardy began on 15 October 1918, but ASHTON was not to participate in this, as he was wounded for the second time and evacuated from the front line. He left France on 14 October to return to the United Kingdom. He was still recovering from his wounds when hostilities ceased on 11 November 1918.

The Military Cross was awarded to ASHTON for his gallantry on active service, the citation being published in the London Gazette on 10 January 1919. The citation stated:

2nd Lt. William Proctor Bell ASHTON, 4th Bn. Welsh R., T.F., attd. 15th Bn..

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He found himself, a few hours after joining the battalion, the only surviving officer in his company in an assault on an enemy position. When the company was checked by hidden wire and very heavy fire of all kinds, he rallied and led them forward, going on in advance and fearlessly exposing himself while he cut the wire. By his courage and fine leadership he extricated his company from a perilous position.

With the end of hostilities, ASHTON was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant on 26 December 1919, but he resigned his commission on 19 October 1920, although he was allowed to retain his rank of Lieutenant.

² In this period, this regiment was titled as the 'Welsh' Regiment, but it later changed its title to the 'Welch' Regiment.

Between the Wars

With the end of the Great War, ASHTON applied for a permanent commission in the Army. He was granted a commission in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps in the rank of Lieutenant with effect from 1 September 1923 (service number 31326). In addition, he qualified as an Inspector of Ordnance Machinery (I.O.M.) 3rd Class, later redesignated an Ordnance Mechanical Engineer 4th Class. He had become a student of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers with effect from 7 November 1921, when he commenced studying for at the City and Guilds College in South Kensington, London. At the time, he was living at 40, Woodfield Avenue, Ealing, London W.5.

ASHTON was initially on probation, but he was confirmed in his appointment on 10 January 1925. He was promoted to the rank of Captain on 1 September 1929, and he was raised to the status of an Ordnance Mechanical Engineer, 3rd Class. On 6 January 1935, he was promoted to the rank of Major and graded as an Ordnance Mechanical Engineer, 2nd Class.

This was a time of major expansion in the mechanisation of the British Army, with horses being replaced by lorries and other vehicles. As an Ordnance Mechanical Engineer, Major ASHTON was responsible for the maintenance and repair of vehicles, as well as other arms and equipment. Technology was advancing rapidly, with few soldiers having much knowledge of machinery, engines, and other items. No doubt one of Major ASHTON's key roles was training other officers and organising training for troops in this area of Army life.

Officers in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps were not able to apply to attend the Staff Course as they were specialist officers, and they were expected to remain within their corps for their entire career. This did not mean that R.A.O.C. officers were not appointed to staff roles, and this applied to Major ASHTON, who was posted to the War Office on 1 April 1938. He was appointed a Deputy Assistant Director of Ordnance Services, within the Directorate of Ordnance Services in the Quarter-Master-General's Branch. He worked under the Principal Ordnance Mechanical Engineer, in a period when the British Army mobilised for war and expanded significantly in both size and complexity. ASHTON served at the War Office throughout the campaign in France and Belgium in April and May 1940, including the evacuations from France in which so many vehicles were lost. During his time at the War Office, Major ASHTON lived at 60, Manor Drive, Friern Barnet in Middlesex, where he was lodging with a Mr and Mrs MARTIN. Mr MARTIN was a science teacher at a secondary school. ASHTON was single at this time.

The Second World War

On 22 July 1940, ASHTON was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and he was graded as an Ordnance Mechanical Engineer, 1st Class. It appears that he remained based at the War Office, for on 19 December 1940, he was promoted again, this time to the rank of Acting Colonel on being appointed an Assistant Director of Ordnance Services at the War Office.

On 19 March 1941, Colonel ASHTON relinquished his appointment at the War Office, and commenced his two-month long journey to Singapore. On his arrival, on 24 May 1941, he was appointed the Assistant Director of Ordnance Services of Malaya Command. This meant that he was the senior Ordnance Mechanical Engineer in Malaya Command, so it fell to Colonel ASHTON and his small staff to oversee responsibility for all aspects of maintenance, servicing, and repair of a range of vehicles and equipment.

The equipment was in short supply, as Malaya was low down the priority list with the urgent requirement to re-equip the British Army in the U.K.. Many vehicles were requisitioned, and they were in varying conditions of effectiveness. Colonel ASHTON and the troops on the ground had to work with what they had and make the best use of the resources available to them in Malaya.

On 19 June 1941, Colonel ASHTON was formally promoted to the rank of Temporary Colonel, having held the rank on an acting basis for six months. This was the standard practice of the British Army during the war as the number of officers exceeded the establishment of substantive officers in each rank. His post was redesignated on 20 September 1941 as the Deputy Director of Ordnance Services (Engineering), Malaya Command.

The Japanese invaded Malaya on 8 December 1941, and the Australian, British, Indian, and Malay troops were soon forced to retreat. Much equipment was lost, adding to the difficulties faced by Colonel ASHTON and his staff. The British forces were withdrawn to Singapore Island, where they surrendered on 15 February 1942. Colonel ASHTON was unable to escape Singapore, or chose not to attempt to do so, so he became a prisoner of war of the Japanese.

At the time, he was not to know how long his incarceration was to last, but in the end, it lasted for three and half years. Colonel ASHTON gave his next-of-kin as Mrs W. ASHTON, of 'Thirlesane', Shaw Crescent, Sanderstead, in Surrey.³ It is believed that Colonel ASHTON remained in captivity in Singapore until the end of hostilities in August 1945. An administrative issue that probably passed him by at the time, was the creation of the Corps of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (R.E.M.E.) with effect from 1 October 1942. As a substantive Lieutenant Colonel, ASHTON was transferred across to the new Corps from this date, and he was graded as an Electrical and Mechanical Engineer, 1st Class. The reason for the creation of this new Corps was that the wartime reality of the increasing sophistication of vehicles, machinery, armaments and signalling equipment, coupled with the large increase in the number and range of these across the British Army, meant that the former arrangements of having ordnance mechanical engineering with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps was obsolete.

³ This is believed to refer to his mother, and not a wife as it is not believed that ASHTON ever married.

ASHTON was released from captivity in August 1945, shortly before which (and again probably without his knowledge), he was promoted to the rank of Colonel, his seniority dating from 23 June 1943. Following his release, Colonel ASHTON returned to the United Kingdom, where he was granted a period of leave. On 1 February 1946, he was appointed an Assistant Director of Mechanical Engineering, in the Directorate of Mechanical Engineering at the War Office in London.

In terms of recognition for his service in Malaya in 1941 and 1942, Colonel ASHTON was Mentioned in Despatches on 30 July 1946. He was made an Officer in the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) in the New Year's Honours List published on 1 January 1948. ASHTON left the War Office in February 1948, on being promoted to the rank of Temporary Brigadier on 1 February 1948.

Pakistan and Retirement

On 14 February 1948, Brigadier ASHTON arrived in the newly independent Pakistan where he had been appointed the Director of Electrical and Mechanical Engineering in the new Pakistan Army. On the eve of Partition of British India on 15 August 1947, the Armed Force Reconstitution Committee had recommended the establishment of two separate Electrical and Mechanical Engineers Directorates, which was approved by the new Commanders-in-Chief. The strength of the Pakistan Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (P.E.M.E.) was fixed at twenty officers. At first, the new Corps was located in Delhi in India, but it soon moved to Rawalpindi in Pakistan, where it opened on 12 September 1947. Brigadier G. W. PURSER was the first Director appointed, and he and one Assistant Director took up their new posts in September. In January 1948, two Pakistani officers, Lieutenant Colonel M. MOHAMMEDI and Major K. M. MASUD were posted to the Directorate. Brigadier PURSER did not remain in post for long, as on 14 February 1948, he was replaced by Brigadier ASHTON, who was to remain in post for eight years.

ASHTON was faced with organizing and building the new P.E.M.E. from scratch, with five more officers added to the strength in October 1948, and a further four in April 1951. The following year, the post of Inspector, P.E.M.E. was created, and two more sections added under Assistant Directors. At first, cooperation with the Indian Army was good, but the conflict in Kashmir changed that. The P.E.M.E. found it difficult to obtain equipment, which hindered the proper establishment of workshops and warehouses for stores.

The membership of the P.E.M.E. had to be built up from Pakistani personnel, with trade training commencing as soon as possible. This took time, and there remained a shortage of Armament Artificers for several years. Brigadier ASHTON was kept busy, travelling around Pakistan to visit facilities and to inspect the progress of the building up of the new Corps. Steadily, the Pakistani members of the Corps gained the necessary experience to assume control of the Corps. On 5 November 1955, the first Pakistani Director, P.E.M.E. was appointed in the person of Brigadier M. MOHAMMEDI. Major General K. M. MASUD took over as Director on 24 February 1967.

Brigadier ASHTON relinquished his appointment and returned to the U.K.. He had been promoted to the substantive rank of Brigadier with effect from 29 April 1950, and he was elevated to become a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (C.B.E.) in the New Year's Honours List dated 1 January 1953. This was probably on the recommendation of the Pakistan government. Brigadier ASHTON retired from the British Army on 18 July 1956. He lived at Greathed Manor in Lingfield in Sussex, where he died on 4 March 1981. He left an estate of £119,204.

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Published by: the Author.
