

Major-General Cuthbert Henry Tindall Lucas: the man behind the abduction

by Ruth Wheeler

Much has been written about the abduction of Major-General Lucas during the months of June and July 1920.¹ This article offers an insight into his life and gives an understanding of why he developed a good relationship with his captors.

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ajor-General Cuthbert Henry Tindall Lucas (CHTL) was born on 1 March 1879 in the small market town of Hitchin in Hertfordshire. He was the fourth child, third son of a family of ten. His father, William Lucas was the local director of Barclays Bank as well as chairman of the Hitchin bench of magistrates, a Commissioner of Taxes and a treasurer of the local hospital.

CHTL's mother, Frances Augusta, was the great granddaughter of John De Blaquiery, who was appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland in 1772 and built the American Ambassador's residence in the Phoenix Park. Frances helped set up a hospital and YMCA and at least three of her daughters served as nurses in France during WW1.

The Lucas family were originally Quakers: the family had a reputation for being fair and kind as well as for standing up for what they believed was right. In 1684 William Lucas, his wife and mother, were imprisoned for holding Quaker meetings in their house. Later the Lucas family were ardent anti-slavery campaigners.

CHTL was educated at Marlborough College where he excelled at team sports. He graduated from Sandhurst, the Royal Military College, in 1898, and was commissioned into the Royal Berkshire Regiment as a Second Lieutenant, joining the 2nd Battalion in South Africa shortly



Major-General Cuthbert Henry Tindall Lucas

after. He saw action in Cape Colony, Colesberg, and the Battles of Silkaatsnek, and was promoted to Lieutenant.

After a brief period in West Africa, CHTL saw more fighting in South Africa from November 1901 to May 1902. For the last five months of this period he 'performed the duties of Commandant Richmond Road District and Railway Staff Officer', receiving a gold watch from a grateful community. His skills were further appreciated when he was appointed 'Acting Adjutant to a half battalion on detachment'.

From October 1902 to April 1909, CHTL served in Egypt and Sudan: in the Egyptian army and in the Sudan civil administration as Inspector of Port Sudan and Suakin, managing the district police and collecting taxes, even acting as Governor of the Red Sea Province for four months.

It was in the Sudan that CHTL lost two fingers on his left hand in an accident involving a gun he was attempting to clean.

In his photograph album, he recorded the incident with typical humour. On one page, there is a photo of him smiling in front of a Sudanese hut, with the caption: 'CHTL Last view of him all there'. On turning the page, one is met with the startling x-ray of his mutilated hand!

After almost a year in India, CHTL returned to England and the Royal Berkshire Depot in Reading. Disenchanted with the slow progress of his army career he unsuccessfully applied for a Chief Constable position with the police. He subsequently was promoted Captain and successfully passed the entrance exam for the Army Staff College at Camberley and was there from January 1913 until the outbreak of war in August 1914.

He 'proceeded to France, August 6th 1914 and served as a Disembarkation Staff Officer till the end of September 1914'. This meant grappling with the tricky task of transporting thousands of troops and tons of equipment across the Channel in a short space of time. It was a huge mind and energy-sapping challenge, but CHTL's success repeatedly meant he was not sent to join his regiment at the front, something he dearly wished for. Severe casualties meant that he was transferred to command a Company in 1st battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment throughout October 1914, during the Battles of the Aisne and Ypres'. It was during the First Battle of Ypres in November 1914 that CHTL was placed in temporary command of the battalion, as the eight officers senior to him were either killed or wounded.

In recognition of his achievement in holding the battalion together at a critical moment, coupled with his Staff Officer training, CHTL was 'then appointed Brigade Major, 87th Brigade, 29th Division'. This was the start of his meteoric rise through the ranks; which

was partly due to his unquestionable abilities but also due to the sudden demise of so many senior officers. He was promoted to temporary Lieut.-Col with General Sir John French mentioning him in despatches. This was the first of nine such mentions, which borders on being a record.

From the Western Front, CHTL found himself in Turkey on the Dardanelles peninsula in 1915. He was one of only fourteen officers from his Division to survive the 270 days of the campaign. He was present at every battle that took place at Cape Helles and Suvla Bay, until the final evacuation in January 1916. In August 1915, CHTL was promoted to the temporary rank of Brigadier-General and commanded the 87th Brigade, comprised of: 1st Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borderers; 1st Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers; 1st Battalion, The Border Regiment; and 2nd Battalion, South Wales Borderers.

In a reference for CHTL in 1920, General Sir W.R. Marshall wrote:

During the early days on the Gallipoli Peninsula when things were looking the reverse of rosy, both the brigade and myself owed much to Major Lucas. Of his work as a Staff Officer I cannot speak too highly, but it was above all his personality which was so valuable – determined, cheerful and tactful, he inspired confidence wherever he went.

Marshall pointed out that when he had to relinquish command of the Brigade there was not one dissenting voice in placing Lucas in charge, even though there were more senior officers in the Brigade. He wrote that it was 'probably a unique instance of a Brigade Major succeeding to the command of a Brigade', and demonstrated the 'degree of confidence placed in Major Lucas by his seniors and juniors alike.'

After a few weeks in Egypt, recuperating, training and doing stints protecting the Suez Canal, the 87th under the command of Major Lucas arrived at the Somme. Here the 87th Brigade was 'practically knocked out' on July 1st attacking at Beaumont Hamel and it suffered 'the heaviest loss – over 60% of its available strength...'

Life had to go on and CHTL had to hold his remaining men together and continue the battle. His emotional defences almost collapsed when he received news that his brother back home had suddenly died, while he was walking around the trenches and inspecting the 250 survivors of the 2nd South Wales Borderers (SWB) he saw the 'pools of blood', the men 'partially insane' or 'throwing a fit'.

The Somme became a turning point in his life for several reasons. Amongst his many friends who died on the Somme was Colonel A. M. Holdsworth 'Atty'. Whilst temporarily stationed in England in January 1917, he visited the family. Atty's sister 'little' Poppy had grown up and CHTL suddenly saw in her a future wife.

CHTL returned to the Western Front in April 1917 for the Battle of Arras. He took command once more of the 87th Brigade who 'were very glad to get their old friend back'. The battle was particularly intense with heavy shelling and gas attacks. Casualties were very high.

The Third Battle of Ypres or Passchendaele was remembered for the deep mud and craters and the appalling mustard gas attacks. CHTL had the honour of commanding the 'Old Dubs' (1st Royal Dublin Fusiliers), who marched to their lines singing Irish Republican songs. They attacked with 'extraordinary vigour' winning a V.C. and the day (4 October) was nicknamed the 'Day of the Dubs'.

After marrying Poppy in October 1917 CHTL was back at the front by 12 November in time for the Battle of Cambrai. The 87th Brigade, which he commanded, narrowly escaping being overrun, courageously pushed back the Germans. At the end of 1917, when war-weary General De Lisle went on a months leave, it was CHTL who was entrusted with the 29th Division. In early 1918, he was appointed to command the Machine Gun Training Centre at Grantham in Lincolnshire; returning to France for the Hundred Days Offensive. His help in devising new artillery techniques contributed to the Germans capitulation in November. His contribution was recognised by the French and he received the Legion d'Honneur as well as the Croix de Guerre.



Poppy Lucas

During the final weeks of the last battles, CHTL was relatively safe behind the lines; however, he volunteered to go back to his brigade. He believed that he could do a better job in the thick of it than in the background. Instead he was given a divisional command and promoted to Major General!

At the end of the war he moved to Germany with the Army of Occupation. This was where he took up fishing, often fishing alone. Poppy joined him there until November 1919 when he 'was appointed to command the 16th (Fermoy) Inf. Brigade in Ireland.'

Following his 'escape' from the IRA, Churchill who was reported as being 'purple with rage' at the General's capture, failed to get Lucas court-martialled. Having supporters in the higher military echelons, and being a national hero, meant that CHTL escaped with a private reprimand.

A second son Bob arrived a year after Bill was born during his father's captivity. A daughter followed five years later. In 1927 CHTL was appointed Colonel on Staff, at the General Headquarters of the Rhine Army in Cologne. Army downsizing in 1929 meant that he had to leave Germany. He was awarded the permanent rank of Major-General and offered a job in India. However, he turned this down: it would mean leaving his sons in England to be educated.



The two boys, Bob and Bill Lucas.

After some time, spent fishing and shooting in Scotland, with no sign of an army job, CHTL retired to Stevenage in Hertfordshire. The boys were sent to Cheam Preparatory school in Surrey and to Marlborough. Their father had a curious attitude of wanting the boys to do well, but not too well that they 'burnt their brains out before they left school'.

When the Second World War was declared in 1939, both boys immediately enlisted. Bill was already at Woolwich and joined the Royal Engineers. He was chosen for the elite Combined Operations Pilotage Parties (COPPs) and the Special Boat Service (SBS) serving on extremely dangerous missions behind enemy lines in the Far East. Bob served in India and Burma.

The General spent the war on the Home Front: as soon as war was declared he donned his General's uniform. He would usher his family into the air raid shelter and then stand guard outside watching

the bombing over London. The local Home Guard benefitted from his expertise and years of experience. Their armoured car managed to acquire two WW1 Lewis guns, probably donated from CHTL's WW1 memorabilia.

CHTL produced vast quantities of vegetables, jam, poultry and eggs to help keep the nation fed and he knitted socks and balaclavas for the troops. After the war, the General with two missing fingers took up embroidery and ruffled a few feathers when he won prizes for his exquisite work at local craft fairs. He was not concerned that others might think this 'unmanly'! The General quietly did good turns for others. He was a larger than life character, unconventional in many ways – 'you either loved him or disliked him', his daughter said.

Both of CHTL's sons survived the war, and joined missionary organisations. Whilst helping on a Christian boys' camp in North Wales, Bill died in a freak storm whilst sailing with a group of boys. When their boat capsized, he gallantly swam for help but did not make it.

When the General felt unable to carry on with fishing and shooting, he took up betting on horse races. He approached it with a serious mathematical strategy which proved so successful that he won enough to cover all his expenses and to treat Poppy to grand days out at the races. A national newspaper unsuccessfully tried to hire him as their tipster.

It was at the races, in Towcester on 7 April 1958 that the General died. He was helping to push a car out of the mud and suffered a heart attack. As one condolence card remarked, he died helping others, 'so typical of his very generous and kindly nature'.

Endnote

1. The story of the abduction of Lucas was outlined by Chris Ryan in the *Old Limerick Journal*, Number 51, 2016.



Major-General Cuthbert Henry Tindall Lucas in later years.

Ruth Wheeler is one of Major General CHT Lucas' grandchildren. She inherited her great love family history from her grandmother Poppy who collected and labelled numerous artefacts, cuttings, photos and letters. As a teenager Ruth was given a large box of documents containing Poppy's collection of letters from her husband between 1917 and 1920. These included CHTL's letters from the Front and from his captivity in Ireland. During the last few years Ruth has researched her family's history in more depth particularly her grandfather's fascinating life.

Ruth lives with her husband in London and works part-time as a primary school teacher.