

Captain Eric Archibald McNair VC 9th Royal Sussex Regiment (1894-1918)



By Chris Loader

Captain McNair's background is an interesting one and different to the other winners explored so far. Eric Archibald McNair was born 1894, born in the jewel crown of the British Empire in India, Calcutta. Born to a upper class background, he was the son of a solicitor and went to study when he was a boy at the Charterhouse school where he served as Headboy of the school in his time there. Also in his time there was a member of the football and cricket team of the Charterhouse showing himself to be a young man of sporting ability.



Images from Charterhouse School



After McNair's time at the Charterhouse he won a scholarship to go to Madgen College, Oxford to study classics, where he became friends with the Prince of Wales who would later become Edward VIII. However at the

time when McNair came to Oxford in 1914, the early stage of the First World War had begun. Places such as Oxford and Cambridge Universities' were the factories of where the mass of officers were recruited and transferred over to the OTC the Officer's Training Corps where these young men with no experience of war became Second Lieutenants and expected to lead men into battle. McNair soon became involved in the OTC and was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in 1915, and transferred over to the 9th Royal Sussex. In 1915, McNair saw action in the Battle of Loos the major British offensive of this year, in which the British Army sustained heavy casualties; it was for this action McNair was promoted to a 1st Lieutenant for his actions at Loos. After the battle of Loos, the 9th Royal Sussex was moved to the Ypres Salient, near the village of Hoogle, in Belgium. It was on the 14th February 1916, that Lieutenant McNair would undertake the actions to award him a VC. The London Gazette published on the 30th March 1916, describes the circumstances around the action. 'When the enemy exploded a mine, Lieutenant McNair and many men of two platoons were hoisted into the air, and many men were buried. But, though much shaken, he at once organised a party with a machine gun to man the near edge of the crater, and opened rapid fire on a large party of the enemy who were advancing. The enemy were driven back leaving many dead. Lieutenant McNair then ran back for reinforcements, and sent to another unit for bombs, ammunition and tools to replace those buried. The communication trench being blocked, he went across the open under heavy fire, and led the reinforcements up the same way. His prompt and plucky action undoubtedly saved the situation'. After being received the VC, McNair was promoted to the rank of Captain for his actions, as some of the junior officers had been killed in the attack at Hoogle. McNair served with the 9th Royal Sussex until he was wounded at Guillemont in the Battle of the Somme in August 1916. After suffering, severe wounds at the Somme, McNair was forced to work doing a Staff job as his wounds and sickness made him not fit for active service to return to the Battalion. McNair ended up working in the Chief of General Staff in Italy where he went in 1917. However in the summer of 1918, McNair contracted dysentery at Genoa and as a result he died aged 24, on the 12th August 1918. McNair was buried in the Staglieno Cemetery in Genoa. Eventhough McNair, died young his story shows a young, courageous, brave and determined individual to serve his country right up to his last days. Furthermore McNair's story of being from a privileged background reminds us of the sacrifice given by the young junior officers who had little experience of warfare. Overall McNair provides the First World War in Britain as a class war in unity where many of generation made the ultimate sacrifice.