

MERVYN GREGORY RANDALL



6th June 1918

1896-1918 Aged 21

Second Lieutenant, M.C., 8th (Service) Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment.

Mervyn Randall was born on 21st August 1896 in St. Helier on the island of Jersey. He was the third of six surviving children born to Ellen Gregory and Charles Walter Randall. Two more died in infancy. The Randalls were a brewing family, owning breweries on both Jersey and Guernsey. In September 1907 Mervyn was sent to school in Bradford. The connection was Samuel and Elsie Smith who seem to have been family friends. They lived in Manningham in 1901, where Samuel was a Cashier. In the 1911 Census Mervyn was boarding with them while at Bradford Grammar School, although they had moved to Gomersal when Samuel retired and he had to commute. Mervyn was at B.G.S. for five years on the Modern side, and in 1908 his younger brother Owen joined him. Mervyn's best subjects were History and Geography, however his academic record was moderate. In 1912 the brothers left Bradford, and Mervyn at least went to Felsted School in Essex until 1915. He was in Montgomery House and *'from the first was a certainty for their tug of war team.'*

On 15th January 1915, aged eighteen years five months, Mervyn enlisted in the recently raised Public School Battalion of the Royal Naval Division. Over the following three years he would see extensive fighting. He disembarked with Hawke Battalion at Helles Beach, Gallipoli, in late May and served there as Acting Leading Seaman until January 1916, experiencing drought and swarms of flies over the summer, then severe cold in November. For the first three months of 1916 Mervyn was part of the garrison of the island of Mudros serving as Anti-Aircraft Gun Crew. He returned to the R.N.D. base at Blandford, Dorset in August 1916 and very soon after he successfully applied for a commission. On 1st December he reported to No. 12 Officer Cadet Battalion at Newmarket and was awarded his commission on 28th March 1917.

Second Lieutenant Randall was posted to 8th Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment, joining 'A' Company in Belgium on 2nd June in time to participate in their advances on 6-7th June in the



Battle of Messines. Again on 20th September he saw action in the 'Tower Hamlets' sector of the Ypres Salient, and was also appointed Battalion Signalling Officer. In 1918, 8/North Staffords fought against the first three drives of the German Spring Offensive. In March he was awarded the M.C. for his conduct, *'for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in rallying and taking forward 800 yards a mixed crowd of men of all battalions to a position, from which he kept back the enemy until ordered to withdraw. Again he displayed great gallantry in holding the forward edge of a village, even after the enemy had got through on his flank and was in the village behind him.'* In April he fought near Kemmel in Belgium, then in May IX Corps was sent to the Champagne area to recuperate. The Germans attacked along the River Aisne on 27th May. 8/North Staffords conducted an orderly withdrawal until on 6th June it helped stem the last German thrust against a ridge which was the key to the defence of Reims. Randall's servant reported he was hit by shrapnel and died two hours later. He wrote that *'He seemed a tower of strength to all the boys, for some are no more than boys'*. This tribute was also paid to him: *'Conscientious, keen and hard-working, his signallers were everything to him, and very well he did run them, and I think they repaid him by the way they worked for him. He inspired everyone with the same courage that he had himself.'*



Acknowledgements:

The photo of Mervyn's grave was taken by the author in 2104—neither B.G.S. nor Felsted School have images of him. The family was researched using Ancestry.com. His years at B.G.S. are recorded in the B.G.S. Annual Reports 1908-1912. In the 1901 Census Samuel and Elsie Smith were staying in the same hotel at St. Brelade's Bay as Ellen Randall and three of her children. Ellen and Elsie were the same age, so perhaps were school friends.

For the Randall breweries, I used <http://www.randallsbrewery.com/our-history.htm>, https://www.theislandwiki.org/index.php/Randall%27s_Brewery accessed 29-5-2018. The Jersey company no longer brews, but the company offices are in the Clare Street premises where Charles grew up. He then lived at the Minden St. brewery with his family.

The very useful Felsted School website, <http://archives.felsted.essex.sch.uk/of/warmem/2014/index.php> accessed 29-5-2018, is the source for Mervyn's time there and for his death; however the account given of his life is incomplete. The Jersey newspaper reports of his death are from <http://www.greatwarci.net/honour/jersey/database/randall-mg-marfaux.htm> accessed 29-5-2018. I gratefully acknowledge the use of quotations from these websites.

The Hawke Battalion War Diary for Gallipoli is not available. A summary of his R.N.V.R. career can be found at http://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=royalnavydeaths&gss=anged&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=Mervyn+Gregory&gsfn_x=1&gsln=Randall&gsln_x=1&msbdy=1896&cpxt=1&cp=11&MSAV=0&uidh=6n6&pcat=34&fh=0&h=7436&recoff=&ml_rpos=1. For the Public Schools Battalion sponsored by Churchill at the end of 1914, see <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/12th-december-1914/15/royal-naval-division-public-school-battalion>. Randall's Officer Personal Record is T.N.A. WO 339-79969. The 8th North Staffords War Diary is T.N.A. WO 95/2085/2 and WO 95/2082/1. There are several references to '2Lt M.G. Randall' ('Randle' in one instance) starting with 2nd June 1917. David Blanchard, *The Battle of the Aisne* 1918, (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2015), 178-81, is useful for the role of 21st Division. The *London Gazette* citation for Mervyn's M.C. published on 8-9-18 was repeated in *The Bradfordian* for April 1919. The award was recorded in the War Diary a fortnight after his death. Mervyn Randall was originally buried in Marfaux Churchyard extension. His remains were exhumed and removed to Marfaux British Cemetery and buried with the British dead of the July battle.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper in May 2018. For further information, contact Nhooper1956@gmail.com, or see <http://www.bradfordgrammar.com/former-pupils/bradford-grammar-school-in-ww1/>.