Rifleman Sydney Currie Betts

Prelude. The Battle of Arras was a British offensive on the Western Front during World War I. From 9th April to 16th May 1917, British troops attacked German defences near the French city of Arras on the Western Front. The British achieved the longest advance since trench warfare began, surpassing the record set by the French Sixth Army on 1 July 1916. The battle eventually became a costly stalemate for both sides and by the end of the battle the British Third and First armies had suffered about 160,000 casualties and the German 6th Army 125,000 casualties.1

Sydney’s great-grandparents, Thomas and Elizabeth Betts, lived in Carlton, Bedfordshire.2 The 1851 census describes Thomas as a ‘destroyer of vermin and a sweep’ and Elizabeth as a ‘lace maker’. Their four sons, John (b 1831), Thomas (b 1836), Charles (b 1838) and Henry (b 1840) are described as ‘sweeps’ and the two daughters Fanny (b 1842) and Mary Anne (born 1845) as lace makers like their mother.

By the time the 1861 census was taken on 7th April, the second eldest son, Charles, had become a gamekeeper. Exactly two months later, on 7th June 1861, he married Mary Ann Hall, daughter of Mark Hall, in Carlton.3

Charles and Mary left Carlton around 1865 to take up residence in Eckington, Derbyshire where Charles had secured a position as gamekeeper to Lady Sitwell of Renishaw Hall.4 D. H. Lawrence is said to have used the local village of Eckington and Renishaw Hall as inspiration for his novel Lady Chatterley’s Lover.5 The characters, Mr and Mrs Betts, appear in his book.6 The 1980 BBC adaptation of Pride and Prejudice used footage shot at Renishaw Hall.

Figure 1: Newspaper cutting naming Charles Betts as gamekeeper to Lady Sitwell of Renishaw Hall
In 1871, Charles and Mary were living at Harbour Lands Woods, Eckington with their five children, Charles Hall (born 1863), Ernest (born 1864), Albert Edwin (born 1865), Georgina Isabella (born 1867) and John William (born 1875). Charles was still actively carrying out his duties as a game keeper for the Renishaw Hall estate, taking several poachers to court.vii

Figure 2: Newspaper report of Charles’ wife falling and breaking her arm in December 1879

Charles Hall Betts became a gardener and in the 1891 census, he is recorded as a ‘nurseryman’ and living as a boarder with the Sharratt family in St Pauls Street West, Burton Extra, Staffordshire. In the autumn of 1892, Charles married Margaret Michison Ainsworth in Chorlton-on-Medock, an inner city area of Manchester. The couple are recorded as living at 24, East Grove in June 1893.viii (Margaret, nee Oliver, was the widow of David Stansford Ainsworth. She had married in the autumn of 1887 and gave birth to a son William the following year. Just two years later, in 1889, David died, aged 29 years. He left Margaret £126 15s in his estate about £15,210 in today’s money. In the 1891 census, Margaret and son, William, were living with her parents in Moston Lane Harpurhey, Prestwich. Margaret is described as a ‘dressmaker’.ix)

In 1901, Charles and Margaret with their four children, Charles Oliver (b 1893), Sydney Currie (born 4th February 1895)x, Aurelius Victor (b 1896) and Estella Eulalia (b 1899), together with Margaret’s son, William, and her mother Hannah were living at 51 Northern Grove, Chorlton, Lancashire. Charles was a commercial traveller. By the following year the family had moved to Birmingham where another son, Ulric Ernest, was born in 1902. The family are recorded as living at 68 Oxford Road, Moseley in 1911. Charles was a commercial traveller, in the bronze powder industry. The powder was used in the paint and coating industry to produce an aesthetic and functional finish to metal products. Charles became a man of letters and published several books. They included: ‘The Education of the Soul’ and ‘The Universal Presence and Spiritual Spheres’
which were published in 1909 and 1911 respectively. Charles Betts, LL.D, LHD went on to write, ‘Living Pleasures: or the Constituents of a Life of Pleasure’ in 1912, ‘Self Realisation ’ in 1913, ‘The Man on the Road’ in 1914, ‘The Next War: The British Industries Fair’ in 1916 and ‘Sacrificial Rites and Practices’ in 1917.\textsuperscript{xii}

The 1929 Industrial Fair Guide records Charles H Betts & Co as a listed exhibitor of Arts and Crafts Materials and accessories, shell-flowers, art and lacquering enamels, gold and silver paints, aluminium Paint, leather stains, lustre powders, Bettsana specialities for home and general decoration (Stand No. C.1).\textsuperscript{xii} The company was wound up voluntarily on 16\textsuperscript{th} July 1960 by Charles Oliver Betts, director, Sydney’s eldest brother, who survived the war.

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When war was declared on 4th August 1914, Sydney Betts was working as a photoengraver. Eight months later, on 3rd April 1915, Sydney enlisted at Birmingham in the 15th (Service) Battalion of the Rifle Brigade as a private, No S/9494. At the time of his enlistment Sydney was 20 years and 59 days old, stood 5’ 1” tall and weighed 113 lbs. Following a period of training Sydney was posted to the 7th Battalion Rifle Brigade in France on 13th August 1915, most likely to make up the numbers lost in the Battle of Hooge, where the Germans first used *flammenwerfer*, or flamethrower to devastating use.

When Sydney arrived in France he found himself in the Ypres sector. The War Diary for the 7th Rifle Brigade, 14th Division for 21st December 1915 lists him as being in ‘A’ Coy.xiii

On 28th February the 7th Rifle Brigade were marched to Arras where they were in support trenches at Roclincourt during the first month of the Battle of the Somme. On 12th August 1916, they took up front line positions in Delville Wood where they sustained in excess of 238 casualties by the 31st August. After rest and training, the 7th Rifle Brigade were back fighting at Delville Wood on 15th September and on that one day alone suffered 298 casualties. Amazingly Sydney was left unscathed. Over the winter the battalion spent their time training, in reserve or the front-line trenches, waiting for the weather to improve and for the start of the Spring Offensive. The men spent some respite time in the underground Ronville caves in Arras. The Commanding Officer described them in the battalion war diary as:

Caves, in chalk excavations, of considerable antiquity under the suburbs of Arras. The depth varies from 70 to 90 feet. Various exits have been cut out for military requirements. They are lit by electricity throughout. A touch damp. A complete absence of noise from the guns.

Figure 6: The Ronville caves under Arras
On the 9th April 1917, the Battle of Arras commenced. Zero hour was 5.30 am. The first objective was ‘The Harp’ defences due south of Tilloy, the second objective, the Feucy line and 800 yards further on the village of Wancourt.

Figure 7: Map showing the position of ‘The Harp’ south of Tilloy, the first objective in the Battle of Arras on 9th April 1917. The brown line is the ‘Feuchy’ line and behind it Wancourt

On the following day, 10th April, the advance continued at noon. ‘A’ Coy was in the rear of the 7th Rifle Brigade. After a stop for a meal, the battalion made ready for the final advance with supporting cavalry. A heavy snow storm blew in the face of the enemy and concealed the brigade’s movements for a while. As the brigade continued their advance, a considerable artillery barrage opened up together with rifle fire from the enemy, who were entrenched at Wancourt and the ridge behind it, causing some casualties. The cavalry advance was checked by wire in the front of their objective and the advance came to a halt.
At about 3.30 am on 11th April, orders were received to attack Wancourt at 6.30 am. The British artillery barrage entirely failed and the advance was checked by heavy rifle fire from the front and enfilade from right and rear. After considerable confusion the companies were reorganised as before and the Lewis guns effectively silenced the enemy rifle and machine gun fire.

On 12th April the Germans evacuated Wancourt.14

There is some confusion as to the date that Sydney was killed. The Birmingham Daily Gazette on 24th April 1917 reports that:

Lewis-Gunner Sydney C Betts, 7th Rifle Brigade, killed instantly whilst in action on 11th April last, aged 21. Two other brothers are serving.

Figure 8: Entry of casualties for the 7th Rifle Brigade after the Battle of Arras

The war diary for the 7th Rifle Brigade shows a Betts N., No S/9592 killed in action on the 11th April 1917. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records show only one 'Betts' killed in April 1917 and that was Sydney. The date they have recorded for his death, though, is 15th April. The S/9592 number identifies two other soldiers from different Rifle Brigade Battalions who survived the war, so the 7th Battalion casualty return for 'Betts N.' must refer to Sydney. The date of the 11th April tallies with the Birmingham Daily Gazette notice on 24th April. This means that the Commonwealth War Graves date for his death is incorrect. His service record notes that he died from a 'gunshot wound to head'.

Sydney's personal property consisting of a: wallet; watch; one pair of scissors; pipe; letters; photo; cigarette case and one piece of metal, were returned home. Sydney's father sent away for and received his war medals, the 1945-15 Star, Victory Medal and British War Medal.
Sydney is buried at Warlincourt Halte British Cemetery, Saulty. He is also commemorated at the Hall of Memory, Birmingham and St Mary's Church, Moseley.

The Betts family were friends with the Tallis family. In 1916 Charles Hall Betts, Sydney’s father, wrote a letter to the editor of the Evening Despatch on 3rd May 1916 complaining about the treatment of young Arthur Tallis, who had been sent back to the front shortly after recovering from battle injuries. It was the year that conscription was brought in and many young men were seeking ways of opting out of military service. To read the letter see ‘Lance Corporal Arthur Dudley Tallis’ in the 1916 St Mary’s memorial section of the WW1 project of the Moseley Society History Group.

Sydney’s brothers survived the war. Charles, a Midland Cricket Club player for Kings Heath, served in either the RAMC or as a gunner in the RGA. Aurelius started out as a private in the Warwickshire Yeomanry, No 3173, before transferring to the Corps of Hussars, Royal Warwickshire Regiment, No 311037. He gained a commission and was wounded in the Battle of Arras. He finished the war as a Captain in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment.

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Endnotes

i The Battle of Arras

ii 1841 census

iii England Marriages 1538-1973

iv 1871 census records Ernest Betts as being born ib Derbyshire in 1865
*Derbyshire Times*, 3rd September 1867

v Renishaw Hall
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renishaw_Hall

vi The roll of Mr and Mrs Betts is not clearly defined in the book but there is a reference in Chapter 7 that might indicate that Mrs Betts was the housekeeper: ‘Mrs Bolton ate with Mrs Betts in the housekeepers room since they were agreeable’. In Chapter 11 there is reference to Mr Betts: ‘Mr Betts drove her in the trap to her house in the village with the box.’ Chapter 16 refers to Mr Betts again: ‘He was determined to send Fields and Betts to the wood...’ The 2015 film version of the book defines their rolls more clearly as housekeeper and head gamekeeper.

vii *Derbyshire Courier*, 1st April 1865
*Derbyshire Times & Chesterfield Herald*, 7th April 1869

viii Manchester Rate Books 1706-1900

ix England & Wales marriages 1837-2005, Prestwich, 3/4, 1887, 8D, 426
England & Wales deaths, Prestwich, 1889, 2/4, 8D, 332
Probate England & Wales 1858-1959
England & Wales births, Prestwich, 1888, ¼, 8D, 417
Manchester, England, Non-Conformists Births & Baptisms 1758-1912

1911 census, reference to being an author
Amazon Books

Grace’s Guide
http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Charles_H._Betts_and_Co

National Archives 7th Battalion Rifle Brigade war diary, Ref WO 95/1896/1, p 41

See xiii, pp 170-178

Birmingham Daily Gazette, 3rd August 1914

Birmingham Mail, 5th May 1917

WW1 Medal Index Cards

Illustrations

Figure 1 Derbyshire Times, 3rd September 1867

Figure 2 Derbyshire Courier, 1st December 1879

Figure 3 Birmingham Daily Post, 3.6.1914

Figure 4 Amazon books
https://www.amazon.it/Education-Soul-Charles-Hall-Betts/dp/B00TXQ39UK

Figure 5 Advertising poster from Grace’s Guide

Figure 6 The Ronville caves under Arras
http://www.tourisme-nordpasdecalais.fr/J-ai-envie-de/Ville/Arras-une-dentelle-de-pierre-et-de-lumiere

Figure 7 Map of the Battle of Arras
http://battlefields1418.50megs.com/arrasmap06.jpg

Figure 8 National Archives 7th Battalion Rifle Brigade war diary, Ref WO 95/1896/1, p 179