

## Corporal Lewis Thomas Butler

### Distinguished Conduct Medal

Lewis Thomas Butler was born in Leicester on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1887, the son of Albert Henry (Harry) and Sarah Ann Butler (née Thompson), of Winifred Street. The following January he and his older brother Albert were baptised together in St Andrew's church, close to their home, and Lewis was named after his maternal grandfather. Harry Butler was a native of Leicester and was employed in the shoe trade, whilst Sarah came from Edith Weston in Rutland. They had married at St Andrew's in May 1882 and Lewis was the third of their four children, all boys.

By 1891 the family had moved round the corner to Havelock Street and were still there in 1901. However by 1911, when the family was living in Western Road, Lewis was in India as a private soldier in the Sherwood Foresters (Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment), stationed with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion at Gough Barracks, Trimulgherry. This battalion served in India until the Great War. Although his army record does not survive his service number (9041) suggests he had joined up toward the end of 1903<sup>1</sup> when a short service term would involve seven years' regular service, followed by five years in the Reserve. Confirmation that Lewis was in the Reserve in 1914, and thus mobilised at the outbreak of war, comes from the newspaper account of his bravery award.

Both regular battalions of the Regiment were sent to France early in the conflict. Lewis, now posted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, landed with them at St Nazaire on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1914.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly at the end of the war he was awarded the 1914 Star with the clasp which recognised he had been under enemy fire between 5<sup>th</sup> August and 22<sup>nd</sup> November of that year, as well as the Victory Medal and British War Medal.

News of Lewis was received in Leicester in December 1915 when the *Leicester Daily Post* published letters from the Front from servicemen grateful for Christmas packages received from the newspaper's gift fund. Lewis wrote:

"Gentlemen, Allow me to express my most sincere thanks for the parcel you so kindly sent me. I can assure you the contents are most acceptable, and I greatly appreciate and reciprocate your good wishes contained in the card enclosed. The weather is very wet at present in this country, but I suppose the season warrants this."<sup>3</sup>

Other soldiers' letters give a glimpse of the parcels' contents – gingerbread ("particularly enjoyable"), cake, milk (usually condensed or evaporated), and similar comforts seldom seen in the front line – and many, whilst hinting at privations and seemingly intractable military difficulties, hold out hope for an end to the fighting and happier times at home.

The Sherwood Foresters served with distinction on the Western Front and it was in this theatre that Lewis earned his Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM). The award was announced in *The London Gazette* in January 1916, with the citation "for consistently good work in the trenches" following in March.<sup>4</sup> The *Leicester Mail* reported his award and published a photograph of him:

"Pte Butler, while working as a signaller, went to within ten yards of the German trenches, cut their communications, and laid his own wires. This was immediately before the big battle of Hooge, and his coolness under the difficult circumstances deservedly won the attention of his superior officers."<sup>5</sup>

The newspaper recorded that Private Butler was a GPO telephone linesman and lived at home with his mother and an only brother, his father having died whilst he had been away (in fact in 1915). His brother Albert had died in 1904, whilst another older brother, William, had died in infancy, leaving just Lewis and his younger brother Ernest.

Lewis' medal was presented to him on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 by the Duke of Rutland, Lord Lieutenant of the County, at a parade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cadet Battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment held in Victoria Park, Leicester, on a day of torrential rain as the newspaper account noted. The Duke congratulated him on his bravery and Lewis was heartily cheered.<sup>6</sup>

Now promoted to Corporal, Lewis next appears in the war record in March 1918 when he was taken prisoner at Lagnicourt during the German Spring Offensive. He was posted as missing and then listed by the International Red Cross as having been captured, unwounded, on 21<sup>st</sup> March. In August he was in Parchim camp in Mecklenburg, Germany, and on 27<sup>th</sup> November, following the Armistice, in Friedrichsfeld camp, north of Cologne. From there he was repatriated, arriving in Dover on 30<sup>th</sup> November.<sup>7</sup>

Returning to Leicester after demobilisation Lewis was initially resident at the family home in Western Road. However, in the late summer of 1919 he married Florence Wignall (née Petty), a widow with three children. Their home was at 22 Porter Street, Leicester. The 1921 Census recorded that Lewis worked in the Post Office engineering department, whilst his wife was a shoe machinist. The two younger children were at school and the eldest daughter worked at Woolworth's in Granby Street. As Lewis had put telephone engineering skills to use in the trenches it seems likely that he began this work after leaving the regular army around 1910 and then continued in post-war civilian life.

With over 300 Club members, including the other seven men who had won medals, Lewis was present at the Belgrave Working Men's Club and Institute on the evening of Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> November 1919 at a supper and entertainment to welcome back all those members who had served in the war and to commemorate those who did not return. The Club's magnificent Roll of Honour was unveiled and each medal winner was presented with a framed photograph of the eight of them together.<sup>8</sup>

At the start of the Second World War in 1939 Lewis and his wife were still living in Porter Street, when he recorded his occupation as a fitter's labourer in engineering. He died in Leicester in June 1957, aged 69, and was buried on 2<sup>nd</sup> July in Saffron Hill Cemetery. Florence died in 1968, aged 82.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://armyservicenumbers.blogspot.com/2011/08/sherwood-foresters-1st-2nd-battalions.html>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/regiments-and-corps/the-british-infantry-regiments-of-1914-1918/sherwood-foresters-nottinghamshire-derbyshire-regiment/>

<sup>3</sup> *Leicester Daily Post*, 21 Dec 1915, p5

<sup>4</sup> *Supplement to The London Gazette*, 11 Mar 1916, p2655 <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> *Leicester Mail*, 3 Feb 1916, p3

<sup>6</sup> *Leicester Daily Post*, 3 July 1916, p1

<sup>7</sup> See <https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/en/>

<sup>8</sup> See *Leicester Evening Mail*, 12 November 1919, p2, and *Leicester Daily Post*, Weds 12 November 1919, p2