

EUAN LUCIE-SMITH

Rewriting black history of the First World War



It was fitting that during Black History Month in October 2020 we were made aware of the fact that the first black British officer to be killed in action in the First World War was an Old East-bournian, Euan Lucie-Smith (Gonville 1905-06).

This came to light because the war memorial plaque honouring Lt Lucie-Smith was to be auctioned in November in London.

Not only was Lt Lucie-Smith the first black officer casualty of the war, but he is also believed to be the first black officer to be commissioned into a British army regiment during the war, in September 1914. His story has essentially rewritten black history of the First World War, as it was previously thought that the first black officer casualty was Walter Tull, who was killed in March 1918.

Lt Lucie-Smith was born at Crossroads, St Andrew, Jamaica, on 14 December 1889, the son of John Barkley Lucie-Smith, the Postmaster of Jamaica, and Catherine 'Katie' Lucie-Smith (née Peynado Burke). He had a mixed heritage background; his father was a white colonial civil servant and his mother the daughter of the distinguished

Jamaican lawyer and politician Samuel Constantine Burke, who campaigned for Jamaican constitutional reform in the late 19th century through his desire for Jamaica to have greater control over her own affairs than Whitehall. Burke's advocacy on behalf of both the black and (using the terminology which he used at the time) the 'coloured' populations of Jamaica, helped create a reputation that even led him to later be referred to, by name, in an essay of the renowned black activist, Marcus Garvey.

Lucie-Smith was educated in England, initially at Berkhamsted School, before joining Gonville House at the College for one year, before returning to Jamaica. He served with the Jamaica Artillery Militia from 1911 and he is listed as a lieutenant in a pre-war *Forces of the Overseas and Dominions* list. Just six weeks after the outbreak of war, he was commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant into the regular force of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, appearing in the supplement to the *London Gazette* of 30 November 1914:

'Dated September 17, 1914, The under-mentioned candidates from the self-governing Dominions and Crown Colonies to be Second Lieutenants. – Euan Lucie-Smith, Royal Warwickshire Regiment...'

Believed to have been the only name on this list from the Caribbean, or East and West Africa, he appears as the first of 14 names, giving him seniority above the other men also commissioned from Australia, Canada, India, South Africa and New Zealand. This is also confirmation that he was commissioned two years and eight months before Walter Tull.

He arrived in France on 17 March 1915 and it was just over a month later on 25 April, that he was killed in the Second Battle of Ypres, aged 25.

Although he had initially been reported missing, a statement made by a Pte. F Jukes, at Suffolk Hall Hospital, Cheltenham, stated: 'Lieut. Lucie-Smith - Was told by his servant that he was killed, and had seen him dead. Shot through the head'.

He has no known grave and is commemorated on Panel 2 to 3 of the Ploegsteert Memorial, Belgium. His name appears on the Old East-bournian war memorial in the Memorial Arch at

the College, as well as on Berkhamsted School's memorial.

On 12 November, the memorial plaque was sold by auctioneers Dix Noonan Webb for £10,540 (£8,500 hammer price), 13 times its pre-sale estimate, and a world record price for a First World War plaque. It was bought by The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers Museum (Royal Warwickshire) after substantial fundraising.



The plaque had been discovered by former Member of the European Parliament, James Carver, who is a keen collector of medals relating to West African soldiers of the Victorian and Edwardian era. He said: 'The greatest wish of any medal collector or amateur historian, is to discover an item of genuine historical importance which challenges the accepted narrative. I am thrilled with the result of today's sale, but it's not the price that's important to me, it's the story of Euan Lucie-Smith and black soldiers like him, who, despite being largely overlooked, played an important part in our military heritage. I really hope my find inspires more people to explore the role played by British serviceman, from all backgrounds, to secure the freedoms that we enjoy today, and often take for granted. I am very pleased that it has been bought by a museum and will now be seen by future generations.'