

Private Charles George Holt[©]
Regimental number: 34563
1st Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment

born: 1882–died: 20 or 21 April 1918¹

Private Charles George Holt was one of three brothers who fought through the First World War. He survived the ferocious battle of the Lys at Festubert only to be killed just days later at Gorre, France. His brothers both survived.

Charles was the third of six children born to Charles Holt and Emma Simmons. Charles Sr. was a carpenter, born about 1852 in Godalming, Surrey, England.² He married Emma Simmons on 19 May 1877 in Camberwell, London, England.³ Emma had been born about 1858 in Campden, Gloucestershire, England.⁴

The first child of Charles and Emma was William, who was born in the fourth quarter of 1878 in Camberwell.⁵ In 1907 at the age of 28 he married Edith Phillips in East Dulwich, London. By 1911 they had one son, Philip William, 2, and were still living in Camberwell. It is possible that William died in 1912 in Hackney, London.⁶

The second child of Charles and Emma was James, who was born on 14 January 1880 in Camberwell.⁷ At the age of 25, in the last quarter of 1905, he married Emma Rebecca Warner in London.⁸ In 1911 James and Emma were operating a coffee house but had no children.⁹ James enlisted with the Royal Navy on 31 December 1917, serving on HMS *President II* until 31 March 1918, when he transferred to the Royal Air Force. He was of small stature, only 5' 6.5" tall, having a fresh complexion but a deformed left toe.¹⁰ In 1939 James and Emma were operating a dining room.¹¹

Charles was the third child of Charles and Emma, and was born in the first quarter of 1882 in Upper Norwood, London.¹²

The fourth child of Charles and Emma was Herbert John (or sometimes John Herbert), who was born on 28 October 1882 in Camberwell.¹³ By 1909, when Herbert was married at the age of 25, his father had died. Herbert married Gertrude Maud Minchin in Chipping Norton with Over Norton, Oxfordshire, England, on 8 May 1909.¹⁴ In 1911 Herbert and Gertrude were living in Camberwell. They had no children, and Herbert was a clerk to a gold mining company.¹⁵ On 15 October 1917 Herbert, like his brother James, joined the Royal Navy. He too was slight, only 5' 6.5" tall with hazel eyes and a fresh complexion. Like James, Herbert also served on HMS *President II*, and transferred to the Royal Air Force on 31 December 1917.¹⁶ It appears that after the war, Herbert returned to working for the gold mining company, as he sailed aboard HMS *Athlone Castle* from Durban, Capetown, South Africa to Southampton, England, arriving on 1 April 1938, traveling in first class.¹⁷

Two daughters were the last children of Charles and Emma. Emma Elizabeth was born on 19 September 1885 in Camberwell. She attended Woods Road School.¹⁸ In 1911, when she was 25 and single, she and her sister Edith Kate, then 14, were living together. Emma was a dressmaker working at home on her own account.¹⁹ Their mother has not been found in the 1911 Census. The only information found for Edith Kate was in the 1901 and 1911 censuses, which indicate that she was born around 1897.²⁰ In the summer of 1917 Emma married John Henry Chalke in Croydon, Surrey.²¹ In 1920, John and Emma were living at 31 Cintra Park, Upper Norwood, London.²² By

1939 John was a sub-postman in Worcestershire,²³ but on 4 October of that year John died, leaving his estate to his wife Emma.²⁴

In 1891 the Holt family was living in Peckham, Camberwell.²⁵ In 1901 the family had moved to a new address in the same town. Charles Sr. was a house carpenter, William was a company clerk, James was a draper's porter and Charles at 19 was also a company clerk.²⁶ Sadly, Charles Sr. died in Camberwell in the summer of 1908 at the age of 56.²⁷

In 1909, Charles, Herbert (prior to his marriage later that year) and their mother were living at 5 Crystal Palace Road in Dulwich, London.²⁸ On 23 July 1910 Charles married Frances Amelia Keegan, aged 29, at Leytonstone, Essex.²⁹ A few months later when the 1911 Census was taken, the young couple was living in Leyton, Essex, where he was a clerk in a stock broker company.³⁰ Sadly, it appears that Frances died early in 1916 and they had had no children.³¹

Regrettably, only about 30% of UK service records still exist, due to a fire resulting from a 1940 WW II air raid on the Army Records Office in Walworth, London,³² and it appears that Charles' and his brothers' records were not saved. As a result, certain specifics of Charles' military experience were not obtainable.

It is known that Charles was a private with the 1st Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment. He was wounded and admitted to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station (CCCS) on 20 April 1918 with shrapnel wounds to his abdomen and buttock and a fractured forearm. A casualty clearing station (CCS) was a military medical facility behind the front lines that was used to treat wounded soldiers. A CCS would usually be located just beyond the range of enemy artillery and often near transportation facilities (e.g., a railway). The CCS received battlefield casualties from regimental aid posts located in the combat zone. Casualties that could not be adequately treated in the CCS were stabilized there before being transported to a field hospital or military hospital.³³

The war diary of the 1st Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment³⁴ (commonly referred to as the Glosters³⁵) describes the terrible battle of 9 to 18 April 1918 at Givenchy and Festubert in northwestern France, in which Charles fought. This was known officially as the Battle of the Lys. Throughout the month of April, all the low-lying land around the La Basse Canal was wrapped in a thick mist, which often lasted all day. It was seldom possible to see more than a few hundred metres, often much less. This, of course, made it difficult for the airplanes, and led to one incident of allied bombers attacking their own soldiers.

Early in the first attack, a Portuguese battalion had yielded to the German advance, but the 55th Division had held firm, beating all attacks and capturing almost 800 prisoners. The following week, even with considerable shelling and intense aerial activity by the Germans on the battlefield, the Glosters' sector was relatively calm, as the enemy was engaged in bringing up more troops, effectively tripling the number of guns for the second attack.

On 17 April, the regiment captured a German soldier who had become disoriented in the mist. He had been engaged in spotting positions for heavy trench mortars. As a result of questioning, information was obtained about an imminent attack. On 18 April, from 4:00 a.m. to 6:30 a.m. the Germans attacked with an intense firing of gas shells aimed at the back areas and gun positions. The Glosters' artillery suffered significantly. However, having been forewarned, possible prominent works had been temporarily evacuated for more advanced positions. At 6:30 a.m. the enemy gunners shortened their range, firing on the village and HQ. Fortunately, the Glosters' trenches were in splendid condition, so little damage occurred.

About 8:15 a.m. the infantry attack commenced with the Germans swarming from their lines, heralded through the mist by a chain of Very Lights, which are essentially flares. A few breaches of the lines occurred, and although subjected to hot fire the advancing Germans could not be checked. A number of Germans got through a gap into the orchard and village behind the Division lines, but one line was quickly reorganized to contain the Germans and prevent reinforcements from arriving. Still, this group of German snipers had a choice location and did grave damage once the mist lifted: machine gunners, runners and stretcher bearers were shot down as fast as they appeared on the road. Even the dressing station was penetrated, killing and wounding several of the medical staff and casualties.

The battle raged, with the Germans having some successes. Since the fog had lifted, German airplanes were flying low and were busy bombing and shooting up various keeps in the lines. By 11:00 a.m. the Glosters' casualties included eight officers and about 150 Other Ranks (ORs). Even the headquarters was under significant attack, so all orderly room records and material were destroyed and the last two pigeons released. The first pigeon went off well, but unfortunately flew in the wrong direction, and the second was blown up by a shell within 50 yards of HQ.

A decision was made to clear the Germans from the orchards and village before nightfall. A Welsh company took the situation in hand, and they succeeded in capturing or killing this group of Germans.

By noon, the Germans appeared to realize that their attack had failed. As they attempted to crawl back to their lines from shell holes between the village line and the German lines, they were shot in scores. Very few prisoners were taken, and most of those were already wounded. One German American had suddenly loomed out of the mist, hands in his pockets and a large cigar in his mouth, and announced to the nearest soldier that he was "thoroughly fed up."

By 5:00 p.m. the action was over, and by 10:00 p.m. the Glosters were relieved. In reviewing the attack, it was found that the Germans had not attempted to advance in mass formations or successive lines, but tried instead to infiltrate by groups. Some of the Germans were not even armed, instead carrying blankets, ammunition and three days' rations. Their goal had been to reach Bethune, but they had failed.³⁶

Charles survived that terrible battle and with his regiment was transferred to Gorre on 19 April, but the fighting continued. The war diary for 20 April simply notes that two ORs were killed and six were wounded. Charles was one of those injured and transferred to No.1 CCCS. The diary for No. 1 CCCS notes that Charles died the next day, 21 April; however, his gravestone identifies his death as 20 April. He was buried at Pernes Military Cemetery, Plot 1, Row C, Grave 4.³⁷ His grave bears the additional quote:³⁸

UNTIL THE DAY BREAK
AND THE SHADOWS FLEE AWAY



Gravestone of Private Charles Holt
Source: Find a Grave

Charles was posthumously awarded the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918), and the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre).³⁹

He was also awarded a war gratuity of £11, which indicates that he had enlisted in November 1915,⁴⁰ shortly before the death of his wife. The war gratuity was introduced in December 1918 as a payment to be made to those WW I servicemen who had served in the home service for a period of at least six months, or for any length of time if the man had served overseas.⁴¹ The No. 1 CCCS chaplains' journal notes that on Charles' death, a letter was sent to his wife Mrs. C. G. Holt at 31 Cintra Park, Upper Norwood, but his sister Emma and brother-in law John Henry Chalke were living at that address. John Henry Chalke was also named as the executor of Charles' will and received his outstanding pay and war gratuity.⁴²

Charles was just 36 when he died, having lived through so much tragedy as he answered the call to war, including the premature death of his wife, and although it could not be confirmed for his mother, the death of his parents as well.

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¹ The chaplain's diary for No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station identifies Charles as being admitted on 20 April 1918 and dying the subsequent day. However, his grave marker identifies his date of death as 20 April.

² "1891 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Charles Holt, Civil Parish: Camberwell, Town: Peckham, Piece: 482, Folio: 86, Page: 38

³ "London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754–1931," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Charles Holt

⁴ "1891 England Census," *Ancestry*, entry for Charles Holt

⁵ "GRO online index–birth," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 25 March 2020) entry for Holt, William, Volume 01D, Page 897

⁶ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for William Holt, Registration district: Hackney, Inferred county: London, Volume: 1b, Page: 480

⁷ "UK, Royal Navy Registers of Seamen's Services, 1853–1928," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for James Holt

⁸ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Emma Rebecca Warner, Registration district: St. Pancras, Inferred county: London, Volume: 1b, Page: 312

⁹ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for James Holt, Registration district: Camberwell, Registration district number: 27, Sub-registration district: Camberwell North, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 19, Piece: 2503

¹⁰ "UK, Royal Navy Registers of Seamen's Services, 1853–1928," *Ancestry*, entry for James Holt

¹¹ "1939 England and Wales Register," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for James Holt, Enumeration District: AEIJ, Registration district 25-2

¹² "GRO online index–birth," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Holt, Charles George, Volume 01D, Page: 932

¹³ "UK, Royal Navy Registers of Seamen's Services, 1853–1928," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Herbert John Holt

¹⁴ "Oxfordshire, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754–1930," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Herbert John Holt

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- ¹⁵ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Herbert John Holt, Registration district: Camberwell, Registration district number: 27, Sub-registration district: Peckham South, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 18, Piece: 2588
- ¹⁶ "UK, Royal Navy Registers of Seamen's Services, 1853–1928," *Ancestry*, entry for Herbert John Holt
- ¹⁷ "UK, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Herbert John Holt
- ¹⁸ "London, England, School Admissions and Discharges, 1840–1911," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Emma Holt
- ¹⁹ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Emma Elizabeth Holt, Registration district: Edmonton, Registration district number: 132, Sub-registration district: Hornsey, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 10, Piece: 7202
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1916–2005," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Emma E Holt, Registration district: Croydon, Inferred county: Surrey, Volume: 2a, Page: 734
- ²² "London, England, City Directories, 1736–1943," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for John Henry Chalke
- ²³ "1939 England and Wales Register," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Emma E Chalke, Enumeration District: QKJV, Registration district: 376.1
- ²⁴ "England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858–1995," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for John Henry Chalke
- ²⁵ "1891 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Charles Holt, Civil Parish: Camberwell, Town: Peckham, Piece: 482, Folio: 86, Page: 38
- ²⁶ "1901 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Emma Holt, Registration district: Camberwell, Sub-registration district: Peckham, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 22, Piece: 507, Folio: 107, Page: 25, Household schedule number: 187
- ²⁷ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Charles Holt, Registration district: Camberwell, Inferred county: London, Volume: 1d, Page: 366
- ²⁸ "London, England, Electoral Registers, 1832–1965," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Herbert John Holt
- ²⁹ "Essex, England, Church of England Marriages, 1754–1935," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Charles George Holt
- ³⁰ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Charles George Holt, Registration district: West Ham, Registration district number: 188, Sub-registration district: North Leyton, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 11, Piece: 9644
- ³¹ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Frances A Holt, Registration district: West Ham, Inferred county: Essex, Volume: 4a, Page: 11
- ³² "How to research a soldier," *The Long, Long Trail, The British Army in the Great War of 1914–1918* (<https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/soldiers/how-to-research-a-soldier/how-to-find-a-soldiers-service-record/>: accessed 25 March 2020)
- ³³ "Casualty Clearing Station," *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualty_Clearing_Station: accessed 25 March 2020)
- ³⁴ "UK, WWI War Diaries (France, Belgium and Germany), 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), Regiment or unit: Gloucestershire Regiment; Sub-unit: 1st Battalion; Division: 1st Division Piece description: Piece 1278/1-5:3 Infantry Brigade: 1 Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment (1914 Aug–1919 Apr); Piece number 1278; pages 391–400
- ³⁵ *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gloucestershire_Regiment: accessed 25 March 2020) entry for Gloucestershire Regiment

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station,” *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Holt, C. G.

³⁸ *FindaGrave* (<https://www.findagrave.com/>: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Private Charles George Holt

³⁹ “British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914–1920,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Charles G Holt

⁴⁰ “UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects, 1901–1929,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 25 March 2020), entry for Charles Gorge [*sic*] Holt

⁴¹ “What was the war gratuity?” *The war gratuities of WWI* (<https://wargratitude.wordpress.com/2015/08/16/what-was-the-war-gratuity/>: accessed 25 March 2020)

⁴² “UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects, 1901–1929,” *Ancestry*, entry for Charles Gorge [*sic*] Holt