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Horse Guards, Whitehall, London, SW1A 2AX



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This week's podcast features the bizarre life and military career of **Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Wintle MC** of The Royals.

YOU COULDN'T MAKE IT UP

The son of a British diplomat, Wintle was born in Imperial Russia in 1897 and educated abroad. At the outbreak of the First World War, the sixteen-year-old Wintle was living in Dunkirk with his parents and managed to attach himself to the pioneer Royal Navy aviator, Commander (later Air Commodore) Charles Samson, who – for lack of sufficient aircraft – used private cars mounted with machine guns to patrol the Belgian border. This was the first use by the British of 'armoured cars' and led to the formation of the Royal Naval Air Service Armoured Car Squadron.

After this initial brush with the war, Wintle was determined to join up. Following four months officer training, in mid-1915 at the Royal Military Academy Woolwich, Wintle was commissioned into the Royal Artillery: within a week he was at the Front where, during his first night, an exploding shell drenched him in the entrails of the Sergeant to whom he'd only just been introduced. Scared out of his wits by this grisly experience, Wintle found that the solution was to stand to Attention at the Salute for thirty seconds as soon as an enemy bombardment commenced.

Wintle's wartime experiences and eccentricities developed from there: present during the Battles of Ypres, the Somme, La Bassée and Festubert, he is reputed to have single-handedly captured the village of Vesle. But even Wintle's luck was bound to run out in a war in which an infantry subaltern's life expectancy in the trenches was less than six weeks and a Gunner officer's not that much longer.

Nemesis came calling for Wintle during the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917 when, whilst helping to manhandle an 18-pounder field gun across a shell-cratered 'swamp', one of its wheels hit an unexploded German shell. Wintle woke up in a Field Hospital short of an eye, several fingers and a kneecap; his other eye was so badly damaged that for the rest of his life he had to wear a monocle.

This should have been the end of the war for Wintle, but he was determined to return to France. After managing to escape from the Southern General Hospital disguised as a nurse, he persuaded his father to obtain for him a rail warrant that would return him to the Front. Whilst there, in the closing month of the war he won the MC for, as his Citation stated:

... marked gallantry and initiative on 4th Nov. 1918 near Jolimentz. He went forward with the infantry to obtain information and personally accounted for 35 prisoners. On 9th Nov. he took forward his section well in front of the infantry and throughout the day he showed initiative of a very high order and did excellent work.



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In 1920, Wintle transferred as a Lieutenant to The Royals, who were stationed in Aldershot. Amongst the men under his command was Trooper Mays, who succumbed to a life-threatening bout of dysentery and was taken to Aldershot Military Hospital. There, with Mays at death's door, he was visited by Wintle who said to him:

“What is all this nonsense about dying? It is an offence for a Royal Dragoon to die in bed. Get better at once, that is an order. And when you do, get a haircut!”

In 1924 the Royals were posted to Egypt. To prepare his men for this exotic and historic destination, Wintle gave his men a series of lectures on Egyptian mythology. Unsurprisingly, Wintle was very impressed when, on his first stables inspection in the new barracks, he discovered that one of his men, Trooper Capstick, had re-named the horse he had taken over from the departing Regiment after the Egyptian god, Horus.

“Capstick,” enquired Wintle, “are you really interested in Egyptian mythology?”

“Jest a bit, sir... jest a bit,” replied an embarrassed Capstick.

“Have you been reading about it?”

“Nosir!”

“Has there been much talk of it in the barrack rooms since my lectures? About the sphinx, the pyramids, the gods?”

“Not as I’ve noticed, sir.”

“Tell me then, why the devil did you name your horse Horus?” demanded Wintle.

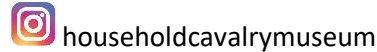
“Ah, I see what you mean, sir... old HORACE here, I named him after me brother, he’s a Corporal in The Life Guards.”

Wintle is on the record as saying that he found soldiering between the wars “rather a bore”, so he welcomed the renewed outbreak of hostilities in 1939. However, despite being a Lieutenant Colonel, the War Office refused to send him with the British Expeditionary Force to France. In a fury, Wintle considered resigning his commission and forming his own army “to take the war to the Hun”. In the event he didn’t carry out his threat but, in the wake of France’s surrender in June 1940, Wintle attempted to commandeer an airplane in order to fly to France, where he intended to rally Free French airman to fly to England so that they could carry on the fight against the Germans.



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Again, he was unsuccessful. However, his act of threatening to shoot Air Commodore A R Boyle RAF, if he would not release an airplane for Wintle's purpose, led to his arrest and imprisonment in the Tower of London.

Even this event, and the subsequent Court Martial, contained elements of farce: to Wintle's considerable disgust, his military escort lost his arrest warrant during the train journey to the Tower, so Wintle arranged for a new one to be issued and then signed it himself.

His subsequent time in the Tower, where he was soon treated by his gaolers (all of whom were Guardsmen) as a hero, became to all intent-and-purpose, a whisky-fuelled holiday. His trial by an Army Court Martial, on charges brought by the RAF, led to his acquittal on two charges and a mere reprimand for his armed assault on Air Commodore Boyle.

During the trial, Wintle, a self-proclaimed and totally unreconstructed patriot who believed that the English were superior to all other races (particularly the French and the Germans), freely admitted threatening to kill Boyle. To the embarrassment of the Government, he added that – as a patriotic gesture and given the chance – he would also shoot several prominent people of whom he disapproved, including the Secretary of State for Air.

On his release from the Tower, Wintle was posted back to The Royals, then deployed in Syria as part of the Cavalry Division (along with 1HCR). Whilst in-theatre, Wintle, who was fluent in French, was deployed gathering intelligence on the Vichy French forces. This led to a proposal that he should join the Special Operations Executive for covert operation in Vichy France and, in due course, he parachuted into the zone where he was betrayed, arrested as a spy and imprisoned.

Whilst in captivity, Wintle made no secret to his guards that it was his duty to escape, which he duly did, only to be recaptured a week later. He then went on hunger strike in protest “at the slovenly appearance of the guards who are not fit to guard and English officer”.

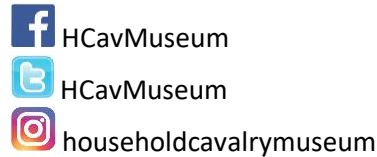
When, for a second time, he escaped (this time successfully) the Vichy French were probably not sorry to see him go having, during his incarceration, been constantly upbraided by Wintle for their cowardice and treachery to their country. When Wintle appeared on *This is Your Life* in 1959, the Vichy French Camp Commandant admitted that, thanks entirely to Wintle's words, the entire garrison of two hundred and eighty men had later joined the French Resistance.

Wintle's post war life was no less confrontational. On one occasion, unable to get a First Class seat on a train, he took over the engine and refused to release it until more First Class carriages had been added. However, his finest moment came when, acting on his own behalf, he took a civil case of fraud all the way to the House of Lords and won with a unanimous verdict. He remains the only non-lawyer ever to have achieved this feat. To publicise the case, Wintle served another spell in prison having forced the defendant to remove his trousers and be photographed.



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A prolific author of fact and fiction, Wintle, who started writing after a horse fell on him in 1924 and broke his leg, he was also the subject of several biographies and a made-for-TV film. Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Wintle, who died on 11th May 1966, was undoubtedly one of England's greatest military eccentrics. His epitaph should be: 'you couldn't make it up'.

I am grateful to Lieutenant General Sir Barney White-Spunner of The Blues and Royals for his anecdotes about Troopers Mays and Capstick, contained in his book *Horse Guards*. The rest of the story is drawn from my own book, *The Drum Horse in the Fountain*, which is available on Amazon.

Next week, I am going to be talking about the Household Cavalry and our appearances at the Oscars...

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**'NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW THIS...'**

**A weekly series of podcasts about the Regiments of the Household Cavalry  
written and recorded by  
Regimental Historian, Christopher Joll, formerly of The Life Guards**

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&  
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