

# IN THE SHADOW OF HERCULE

## THE WAR SERVICE OF ARCHIBALD CHRISTIE BY PETER WRIGHT



The young and fashionable Agatha Christie, from the cover of her autobiography, published in 1977; and 2Lt Archibald Christie in his Royal Field Artillery full-dress uniform, after he graduated at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, in 1909. :Author

SOME PARTS OF THIS STORY have been told a number of times – on film, in plays, on TV, and in books. While researching and reading for this article, I have come across many and varied descriptions of the individual involved: expressions such as *dashing, glamorous, war hero, fought courageously, acts of bravery, heroic war, flying ace* are often used, and obviously journalese. But as usual, there is another side to things, one that has not always been told, so let us examine the possible reasons for these comments.

On one side is the future famous writer, Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie (née Miller), who was born in Torquay on 15 September 1890, the third child of Frederick Alvah Miller, an American citizen, and his wife Clarissa 'Clara' Margaret (née Boehmer). Agatha had an older sister and brother, Margaret

Frary 'Madge' and Louis Montant 'Monty'.

The other side to this story concerns a young man, the son of John Christie, a judge in the Indian Civil Service and his wife Jane 'Jean'. Their son was Archibald Christie, born on 30 September 1889, familiarly known as 'Archie'.

Educated at Clifton College in Bristol, he then sat and passed the entrance examination to the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich and in 1909, graduated as a Second Lieutenant and joined his regiment, the 138th Battery Royal Field Artillery, based at Bulford Camp near Amesbury. As a young man of twenty, he enjoyed playing golf and driving motorcars, but his greater interest was the then new and exciting world of aviation and flying – had not M. Blériot just flown across the English Channel, creating huge headlines?

As was quite frequently done at that period, Archie Christie paid his private tuition fee of £75 and enrolled at the British & Colonial Aeroplane Co Ltd, Bristol Flying School at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain.<sup>1</sup>

On 17 June 1912, he had an early familiarization flight in a school monoplane with instructor Collyns Price Pizey, followed by another flight, this one piloted by the Chief Instructor Henri Jullerot. On the following few days, Archie had further instruction flights with Robert Smith Barry and Ronald Campbell Kemp.

By the start of July he was progressing well, mainly with Smith Barry; then on 4 July, he began taking advanced instruction with Harold Busted, who then considered him competent to go solo – which he did, continuing with circuits, right and left-hand turns and a good landing. By the 13th, Archie was ready for his certificate flight, observed by Captains A.D. Carden and Patrick Hamilton. This he took in a school Boxkite biplane.<sup>2</sup> His RAeC Certificate No 245, was granted on 16 July 1912.

By then the 138th Battery RFA had moved from Bulford to Exeter and with the move, officers had to find new friends

On 19 September 1913, on its way to Lilbourne near Rugby, for the Army Manoeuvres, 'Delta' landed in the Parks at Oxford with some engine problems. Great excitement and pleasure for the local children! :via Peter Davis

