

## LIEUTENANT-COLONEL ROBERT MARKHAM CARTER

(1875-1961). C.B., I.M.S., L.R.C.P., F.R.C.S. (Eng.), D.T.M. (Liverpool), F.C.P.S. (Bombay). - Military Physician, Surgeon, and Whistleblower.

*“At the risk to his own career, he brought to public notice the ‘Mesopotamia Scandals,’ resulting in the resignation of the Secretary of State for India, the Viceroy, and the Commander-in-Chief in India.”*  
*British Medical Journal (1961).*

Robert Markham Carter (1875-1961) [Epsom College 1890-1894] was the son of Captain Arthur William Markham Carter of the 25<sup>th</sup> Bombay Native Infantry. From Epsom College, where he was a member of the Rugby XV, he completed his medical training at St George’s and St Bartholomew’s Hospitals as well as in Paris. After qualifying M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. (Eng.) in 1901, he entered the Indian Medical Service as medical officer to the 1<sup>st</sup> Bombay Lancers. From 1903-1904 he was attached to the Anglo-Turkish Boundary Commission in the Aden interior, and was then posted to the North West Frontier in India, where in the Zakka Zel Expedition of 1906 he was severely wounded. For his action in this campaign he was awarded the medal and clasp. Returning to Britain, Carter obtained the Diploma of Tropical Medicine (Liverpool) and was transferred to employment on the civil side of the Indian Medical Service. His first posting was to the Pasteur Institute at Kasauli and then, because his main interest lay in clinical work, in 1911, to St George’s Hospital, Bombay. In 1912, he obtained the F.R.C.S. (Eng.) and took charge of the teaching of medicine, pathology and morbid anatomy at the Grant Medical College where he had been appointed Professor of *Materia Medica* and Pharmacology, with collateral wards at the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Hospital. In 1913, he was appointed Professor of Morbid Anatomy and Pathology at the Grant Medical College.

At the outset of the First World War, Carter was recalled to military service and was initially placed charge of the *Varela*, a hospital ship equipped and sent to Basra to evacuate casualties from ill-starred action on the River Tigris. The many sick and wounded were transported on barges along this tortuous river. After the battle of Cteniphon, Carter was profoundly shocked at the state of these casualties as they lay “covered with dysentery” and “lying inert amid stalactites of faeces,” without proper medical care or attention. One man that he examined was found to have a fractured thigh, with the thigh perforated in five or six places. On reporting this state of affairs, a number of stormy interviews at various levels led to threats to his career and liberty. He was accused of being “meddlesome and interfering.” Not being intimidated by this and after a final interview with the Commander-in-Chief, General Sir John Nixon, Carter resolved to report his findings to higher authority. This was a courageous act and the result is now part of military and medical history. The Mesopotamia Commission reported that “Carter, by his persistence brought to the notice of his superiors the terrible condition of the wounded when they arrived at Basra from Ctesiphon, and in other ways he revealed shortcomings which might have been ignored and left un-remedied. His sense of duty seems to be most commendable, and he was fertile and resourceful in suggesting remedies.” The Commission found that official correspondence after the battle, such as the telegram sent by Sir John Nixon covered up details of the horrific conditions endured by the wounded. This telegram stated: “General conditions of wounded very satisfactory. Medical arrangements under circumstances of considerable difficulty worked splendidly.” Sir John Nixon, when interviewed, stated that he only had a dim, if any recollection of the circumstances, but he did accept responsibility for it. The result of this enquiry into what became known as the ‘*Mesopotamia Scandals*,’ resulted in the resignation of the Secretary of State for India, the Viceroy, and the Commander-in-Chief in India. “By his resolute actions, Carter brought about great improvements in Mesopotamia. Those of his colleagues who bore the heat and burden of the day in the field did not altogether appreciate the fame and kudos which Carter acquired from the comfort of his hospital ship; but after the passage of years it is evident that Carter was justified in his actions.”

In 1916, Carter was transferred to the India Office in Whitehall to organise medical equipment for the Mesopotamian Expedition; when the war Office took over the operations, Carter was transferred there and was made responsible for fitting out hospital ships and for organising a river fleet and water purification plant. He was three times mentioned in dispatches, promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel, and after questions were asked in Parliament he was appointed *C.B.* in 1918. In 1919, he resumed his civil career in Bombay, returning as First Physician at the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy hospital and Professor of Medicine at Grant Medical College, where he soon acquired a large consulting practice. From 1924-1926 he was President of the Bombay Branch of the British Medical Association and, in 1925, was appointed First Presidency Surgeon and Consulting Physician to the European General Hospital, Bombay. He died in 1961, at his home in Ascot, Berkshire.