

The Reunion des Gastronomes Wolsten-Croft Trophy

Like so many war time service men and women, it has been difficult to find out much about the life and career of Colonel Cuthbert Reginald Wolsten-Croft. It is reasonable to assume that he was a catering professional before the War. Research suggests he was commissioned as a General List officer in 1939 before being transferred into the Army Catering Corps (ACC) on or shortly after its formation in March 1941. He was quickly promoted to Major, and it wasn't long before he received the temporary rank of Lieutenant Colonel. The London Gazette dated 6th January 1944 documents the award of an OBE following his time in Egypt and Libya as Assistant Director of Supply and Transport (Catering).

His citation stated that "he had personally been responsible for the organisation, technical direction and training of the ACC in the Middle East. He brought this young Corps to a high standard of efficiency and done much to improve messing under operational conditions. He contributed in no small measure to the welfare and maintenance of the morale of the troops".

In early 1940, a fledgling Catering Advisory Service was established for the British Expeditionary Force in France. Major Wolsten-Croft and 2 other catering officers reported for duty at Headquarters Lines of Communication at Le Mans. They were met with incredulity as to what they could possibly contribute to the war effort! It wasn't long before they had established offices, obtained transport, and secured trained personnel so they might give instruction to Army cooks. Their initial unit visits left much to be desired with cooks apparently having little or no knowledge of cooking, let alone catering for large numbers. They were soon to prove their worth with Emergency Catering Training Centres being established at Le Man, Rennes, and Rouen.

By June that year Expeditionary Forces were in retreat. The British ocean liner RMS Lancastria, licensed to carry 1,300 passengers, requisitioned by the UK Government in 1939 as a troop ship, assisted with the evacuation from France. Wolsten-Croft found himself onboard and, with a fellow Catering Advisor, began documenting in excess of 6,000 service personnel. On a calm, sunny afternoon on 17th June 1940, she was bombed by a single enemy aircraft and sunk in less than 20 minutes, with the estimated loss of over 3,200 lives. Captain Saville is quoted as saying “it was at this moment I saw Wolsten-Croft and before we went over the side and into the water, we shook hands and said cheerio, in true British fashion”. Miraculously, the Catering Advisory Team survived to tell the tale.

It's not clear where he served immediately after the War but in 1951, he was promoted to full Colonel and became the first ACC officer to Command what was believed to be the newly formed ACC Training Centre in Aldershot. After his retirement from the Army in 1955, it is understood that he went on to become Director of Catering for Butlins.

It is thought that Colonel Wolsten-Croft may have been a past Vice President of the Gastronomes and donated this trophy originally to Westminster College. It was first presented to a student in 1972 and every other year until 1988. Philippe Rossiter recalls that he recovered the trophy whilst he was President and represented it to Westminster Kingsway College in 2013 as part of the then President's Award scheme.

The award of this trophy has been somewhat intermittent as personalities come and go. The Reunion des Gastronomes very much hopes that the Wolsten-Croft Trophy will find a welcome and permanent home with the Worshipful Company of Cooks to be presented to worthy recipients.