

COLONEL ERIC DOUGLAS RASH (K13-22)

The following is taken from the 1968 Register.

He was born 1 June 1904 and attended the College together with 6 other brothers. He was a Prefect and won the Mawby Memorial Prize in 1922. He was a budding sportsman and was in the Cricket XI in 1920, 1921 and 1922, when he was captain. He also won his Fives cap in 1922 and the Waugh Cup for Boxing in 1921.

Two of his brothers who had been fighting on the Western Front died during WW1. Firstly, **Ralph Reginald Rash (K10-13)** was killed during the last few weeks of the Battle of the Somme, and then nine months later, **Arnold William Rash (K06-10)** died on the first day of the Battle of Passchendaele. Both are remembered in the Distinguished section.

He received his Norfolk County Hockey colours 1926-27 and went on to twice play cricket for Egypt in 1933-34.

During WW2 he served as an army officer in the Royal Tank Regiment and after the war was appointed Provost Marshal for the Middle East Land Forces 1954-57. He was a member of the Royal Tank Regiment Officers Club.



I am indebted to Marcus Marvell at the College for passing on the following extensive write up on Eric's amazing life, written in 2025 by Philip Clarke to mark 80th anniversary of his release from Colditz Castle.

Eighty years ago today, on 16th April 1945, Eric Rash woke early with the knowledge that he had just spent his last night in captivity. For the past 632 days, he had been held as a prisoner-of-war at Oflag IVC, otherwise known as Colditz Castle, in Saxony, Germany. Now, though, the town of Colditz was flooded with advancing American troops, and this would be the day that the Schloss was liberated, so that hundreds of allied prisoners could be set free.

Eric Douglas Rash (1904-1987) was born in Wortham, Suffolk on 1st June 1904, as the tenth of eleven children. His family home was at New Waters Farm, which is located on the borders of Wortham and Redgrave – oddly, the boundary passes through the farmhouse, which has some rooms in one parish and some in the other. At Michaelmas, Mr Rash purchased Ling Farm, Wortham, which Eric was later to occupy. All the children were schooled in the village initially, but from the age of 9, Eric attended Framlingham College (Kerrison House), as did all six of his older brothers before him. Eric was the all-round perfect scholar and an accomplished athlete, representing his house and school in almost every sport they played. Eric excelled in cricket – he was in the 1st XI in 1920, 1921 and 1922, and he was the team captain for that last season. He was in the Rugby Fives team and in the Boxing squad, for which he won the Waugh Cup (under 8 stone) in 1921. In his final year, Eric was awarded the Mawby Memorial Prize for his exceptional services to Framlingham College.

Whilst still in education, Eric received the sad news of two brothers who had been fighting on the Western Front during WWI. Firstly, Ralph Reginald Rash (1897-1916) was killed during the last few weeks of the Battle of the Somme, and then nine months later, Arnold William Rash (1893-1917) died on the first day of the Battle of Passchendaele. However, the tragic loss of two brothers at such an early age did not discourage Eric from pursuing a career in the armed forces – just a short while after leaving Framlingham College, he joined the Diss Platoon of C Company of the 4th Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment (the 4th VBNR). In 1924, at the age of 20, he became the Commanding Officer at Diss, and in 1925, 1927 and 1928 he led his Platoon as they joined with the 163rd East Anglian (Norfolk and Suffolk) Infantry Brigade at their annual training camps. Eric also had the honour each Armistice Day of presenting the wreath to be lain upon the memorial at St Mary's Church to the soldiers who fell in the Great War – no doubt, with the raw memories of two fallen brothers on his mind.

In 1922, Eric's brother Rowland Harry Rash (1890-1977) married Doreen Wallace (1897-1989) from Cumberland; she had moved to East Anglia in 1919 to take up a teaching post at Diss Secondary School. In 1931, the couple moved into Wortham Manor, and three years later they were the focal point of the Wortham Tithe Wars – that subject has been written about in detail many times, so I will not mention it further here.

Eric seemed to have another passion, an odd one for a keen sportsman, for he often organised smoking contests at Platoon HQ, which was The King's Head public house on the Market Place at Diss. On one occasion in 1926, he attended the British Legion's monthly meeting in Wortham, where he gave a smoking presentation with several locals, including William Pursehouse, headmaster of Wortham Long Green School (and later, head at Diss Church School).

Eric was a crack-shot with the rifle, and he also had a well-trained Platoon. In October 1927, he took 23 men to Lowestoft for the Infantry Brigade's Shooting Tournament. Eric won the Officer's Cup and he shared first place in the Pool Shoot – Diss C Company also won three other cups and a second place.

After leaving Framlingham, Eric maintained his enthusiasm for sport, for he soon joined Diss & District Cricket Club, and also Diss & District Hockey Club. At the start of the 1925 season, he was elected Captain of the Cricket Club by Honorary Secretary Harry Bardwell (builders merchant), and before the end of the year Henry Apthorpe and William Gaze (auctioneers), committee members of the Hockey Club, had appointed Eric as their Vice-Captain. He was to retain both these roles until he left East Anglia three years later. In 1926 and 1927, after trials in Norwich, Eric was selected to play hockey for Norfolk, with their opening match in both seasons being against Cambridge University Wanderers.

In 1927 cricket season, in late July, Eric scored 128 before being run out at home to Riddlesworth, and before the end of August, he made 86 runs at Garboldisham, followed by 87 runs on the Rectory Meadow at home to Boulton & Paul of Norwich (aircraft manufacturers). At the end of the season, he topped the batting averages with 543 runs in 13 innings, averaging 49.36 (twice not-out).

In January 1928, Eric put Ling Farm up for sale, and in the Spring he moved to London to join the Royal Tank Corps. He continued with his sport, though, joining Highgate Cricket Club – after two trial matches in the 3rd XI he was promoted straight to the 1st XI. The local press described Eric as a "valuable find for Highgate CC" – and so right they were, for a few weeks later he scored 115 runs, one of only two centuries made by his team that season. Eric continued to make guest appearances for Diss, whilst he was home on leave. In 1928, he played in three local cricket matches, whilst in 1929, he played once for the Hockey Club but he suffered a bad shoulder injury at Norwich. Eric was soon promoted to Lieutenant, and whilst abroad with the Royal Tank Corps in 1933 and 1934, he twice played cricket for the Egyptian national team.

On 19th January 1936, Eric married Phyllis Eileen Elaine Young (1909-1989) at Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, but within four weeks he sailed with the Royal Tank Corps to Quetta, India (now in Pakistan). His wife was able to join him three months after their wedding, and it was there a year later that their first child, Rosemary, was born. The couple returned to Essex, and in 1938 their second child, John, arrived. Later, Eric was to be stationed at Farnborough, Hampshire.

At the start of WWII, Major Eric Rash took command of an Armoured Brigade, which in April 1941 was deployed to the Western Desert, in North Africa. In 1942, Eric took part in what were known as the Cauldron Battles, and on 30th May, the long-expected enemy attack began. Fierce fighting continued the following day - it was a mighty battle, and those that had been in France in 1939 said that it had been a picnic compared to what they were now facing. The next morning, Eric's 38th birthday, he took a column of tanks out to meet the advancing forces, and they were soon involved in a blazing battle – Eric said afterwards that there was such a mass of targets, that it was a gunner's dream. However, as the day wore on, the pressure increased, and Eric found that he was the last gun in action, and finally his tank was also blown up. Eric escaped, and he tried to make his way to another detachment, but he was cut off by enemy tanks and infantry, so he hid himself in a hole, about the size of a one-berth tent. As the firing died down, Eric could see enemy search parties scouring the battlefield, so he scattered some kit on the ground, and covered himself in a blanket. On several occasions he was almost discovered – first a young German lad pulled back the blanket and saw Eric's bloody leg, but then ran off thinking he had found a corpse. Next, an Italian motorcyclist stopped and peered into the hole, but he too departed uttering the words "Tommy morto". Altogether, ten soldiers checked the small hole, but left either not seeing a body, or if they did, they thought that it was dead. As daylight faded, Eric was beginning to think

that the darkness would soon give him the chance to escape, but in the twilight two soldiers searched the hole – one pulled back the blanket and poked a pistol into Eric's ear. It was a birthday that he would never forget.

Eric was bundled into the back of a truck, in which there were already some other captured soldiers. As darkness fell, they pulled-up at an encampment of enemy vehicles, which were parked for the night. Eric was searched and most of his possessions were confiscated, but he managed to conceal a small compass. He was given water and cigarettes, and he was put under the watchful eye of a guard named Molzon – incredibly, he knew Eric's cousin, from time they had spent together in Kenya before the war. Overnight, they were wakened several times when they came under attack by British forces, so they had to move on quite quickly. At dawn, they were driven further South in the rear of a truck, in a convoy of enemy vehicles. The lorries bumped and swayed, often hitting rocks, but always throwing up a cloud of dust behind them. As the vehicles spread out, they realised that they were out of sight of those behind them, so Eric and his fellow soldier saw their chance – as the concerned solitary guard drew his pistol, the two captives pushed him out of the truck. A little while later, they jumped over the tailboard and immediately hid behind some rocks until the convoy had passed.

Over the next twenty hours or so, Eric and his comrade walked back North – all they had with them were a compass and a water bottle each. They encountered several enemy vehicles on their trek, but nobody seemed concerned, and one lorry even stopped to ask for directions. Amazingly, the driver failed to recognise the Royal Tank Corp berets that they were still wearing. At night, they wandered through an ammunition dump, and later they came across some parked-up vehicles, from which they took water and a bottle of beer whilst the crew were sleeping. Around 3:00am on 3rd June, they crossed the coast road and three miles later they reached the Mediterranean, where they bathed to cool-off and to wash away the dust. They hid all day, and at dusk they started walking East – as dawn broke, they found themselves in a mine field – it was one of their own! After being rescued by friendly faces, they were given food and drink, and they then spent time recounting their story, and describing what they had seen behind enemy lines. Later that evening, on 4th June, they were driven in the direction of Tobruk, to be reunited with their Brigade. Once back, Eric was immediately promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.

Back in Britain, Eric's wife had received a telegram to say that he was missing (see below), and then another informing that he had escaped. There was a brief article confirming this in the Diss Express on 12th June 1942. Later, on 24th August, a fuller story was given of Eric's capture and escape, along with details of a separate escape by his nephew Charles Rash, the son of Eric's brother Charles. Eric's wife kindly sent him the newspaper clippings

Let. No. Liverpool Wavertree 4000

Any further communication on this subject should be addressed to –

The Under Secretary of State,
The War Office,
Casualty Branch,
Blue Coat School,
Church Road, Wavertree,
Liverpool 15.

and the following number quoted:
OS.1729/R.

Our Ref. (Casualties)

Your Ref.

THE WAR OFFICE,
CASUALTY BRANCH,
BLUE COAT SCHOOL,
CHURCH ROAD,
WAVERTREE,
LIVERPOOL 15

6th August, 1943.

Madam,

In confirmation of War Office telegram of the 5th August, 1943, I am directed to inform you, with regret, that a notification has been received from the Military Authorities in the Middle East that your husband, Colonel M.D. Rash, Commands and Staff, was reported missing on the 15th July, 1943.

No further information is available at present, but all possible enquiries are being made and any further information received by this Department will be sent to you immediately. Should you receive any communication from your husband or should news of his reach you from any other source, will you kindly notify this Office and at the same time forward any card or letter you may receive from him, which will be returned to you after inspection.

In the meantime I am to ask you to be good enough to notify this Office of any change of your address.

I am, Madam,
Your obedient servant,

E.D. Lloyd

Mrs. F.S. Rash,
Sunny View,
105, Grand Parade,
Leigh-on-Sea,
Essex.

The following year, Eric's 44th Royal Tank Regiment were assigned to the 4th Armoured Brigade for the invasion of Sicily, which commenced in June. Unfortunately for Eric, things did not go too well for him, for on 15th July 1943, he was again captured. As before, the Germans searched him, but amongst his possessions they found the newspaper clippings, detailing his earlier escape, and that of his nephew. It seemed to his captors that the Rashes were "bad boys", and Eric was sent directly to Colditz, without ever serving an "escape apprenticeship" at another prisoner-of-war camp. Eric remained at Oflag IVc until it was liberated on 16th April 1945.



After WWII, Eric took command of the 44th Royal Tank Regiment at Bristol; he started playing for their golf team, and he also resumed playing cricket. Later, Eric's family moved to Surrey, where in 1952 daughter Sarah was born. Eric's continued his career into the 1960s – he was finally promoted to Colonel, and after retirement the family moved back to East Anglia. Eric died peacefully at Debden, Suffolk on 19th January 1987, aged 82 years.

We are grateful to his grandson William for all the photos above, which he sent in June 2025.