John Clifford Metcalfe (known to his friends as ‘Cliff’) was born on June 13th 1898, the eldest son of John Richardson Metcalfe and Grace Hollings Metcalfe of ‘Eastfield’, Carlton Road, Liversedge. He had two older sisters, Beatrice and Mary, and a younger brother, Alfred. His father was a Mill Manager and the family home was a substantial stone building – a fitting status symbol.

In 1911 John was shown on the census as a twenty two year old medical student, living with his father John Richardson Metcalfe, who was 60 years old, and his mother Grace Hollings
Metcalfe who was 56. His brother Alfred Hollings Metcalfe was 17 in 1911 and also went to the front, as a Lieutenant with the 1st/4th King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. Alfred survived the war. He would no doubt have commanded another Batley old boy, Orlando Morrison who was in the same regiment in France. The family was completed by a sister, Beatrice Alice, but another sister Mary Elizabeth had married and moved away by 1911.

John Metcalfe began his studies at Batley Grammar School in the summer term of 1901 and quickly proved himself a lively and distinguished scholar. In 1907 he entered Leeds University Medical School with a Major Scholarship and graduated with first class honours in 1912. He was a capable footballer, lawn tennis player and sprinter in his student days. He went on to be a house surgeon at the Leeds General Infirmary. The university holds his photograph with a group of other doctors which was published in an article in ‘Medicine Matters’ in the Leeds Medical School Journal. (1)

![John Clifford Metcalfe, from a University of Leeds Medical School photograph, around 1912.](image)

This was the result of an enquiry to the journal into his career by his niece, Mrs Pat Rushforth. He is smartly dressed and stares out in a confident and determined fashion, with thinning hair and a firmly set mouth. He was a distinguished student, being awarded a West Riding Scholarship in 1908 and an Infirmary Scholarship in 1909. After qualification he spent one year as a Houseman at the Infirmary, and then became ‘Prosector in Anatomy’ in 1913. He was then appointed ‘Dresser’ to the famous Professor of Clinical Surgery at the Infirmary, Berkeley Moynihan. John Metcalfe was certainly on course for an eminent career in surgery. He also had a medical practice in Liversedge.

On the outbreak of war he enlisted in the Territorial Army, which had been organised by Lord Haldane, and joined the 1st (West Riding) Field Ambulance of the Royal Army Medical Corps. He gained a commission, to the rank of Lieutenant on October 15th 1914. This was
published in the London Gazette of November 30th 1914. His original application was made on October 9th 1914 and he was medically examined on that day. In questions asked on his form of application for a commission he noted that he had been educated at Batley Grammar School and Leeds University and that he had passed the preliminary Fellowship exams and that he was a House Surgeon at Leeds Infirmary. He was vouched for on his forms by the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Leeds University.

He was soon in France disembarking there in April 1915 where he saw action as part of the 49th (West Riding) Division for the remainder of the war. He was awarded the Military Cross in May 1917 by His Majesty the King for what was recorded as ‘...long and valuable service’.

Each military Division had three Field Ambulance units. These were not vehicles but mobile front-line units and had responsibility for the recovery and treatment of casualties and the operation of points along the casualty clearing stations.

One of the main problems in the first months of the war was that wounds were infected with tetanus by the fertilisers used by French farmers before it was checked by an anti-tetanus serum. [General Sir Nevil Macready: ‘Annals of an Active Life’]. Macready was Adjutant-General in France, with overall responsibility for Medical Services. The latter inevitably expanded as the size of the army increased and stalemate developed on the Western Front.

The number of hospital beds available rose from 9,000 in 1914 to 97,000 by 1917. The shortage of doctors also grew worse so that by 1915 it rose to two hundred with a wastage of nearly fifty a month. The bravery of the doctors was seen in their frequent imprisonment as they stayed with wounded men, and by their death when they remained with the wounded in the firing line. Eventually they were forbidden to do this and they had to stay at the regimental aid post.

Motor ambulances began to replace horse-drawn carriages and the number of hospital trains was increased. Ambulance flotillas worked to carry the seriously wounded along the canal system of Northern France to hospital ships in coastal ports. Convalescent or Command depots were opened to the rear of the front lines to speed up the wounded in returning to their units. Five special ‘hospitals’ were set up for those suffering from venereal disease – they had less comfortable amenities and patients were put to fatigue work as soon as they were fit for it. ‘Trench foot’ was the most serious disease in the first two years of the war, due to long immersion in cold water and the wearing of tight boots or puttees. Precautions eventually lessened its incidence. In 1915 the threat of gas attacks created yet another medical problem and a separate department was set up to provide effective gas masks and treatment.

Paradoxically war led to progress in many areas – perhaps most obviously in medicine. Metcalfe must have seen great improvements in the treatment of the wounded in his three years at the front. Perhaps this was most obvious in facial surgery. It would be fascinating to know his views on ‘shell shock’. At first the high command wanted the condition to be treated as secretly as possible so that military discipline was not endangered. A man with psychiatric problems might be treated as a coward, a shirker or even a deserter. Many faced
the firing squad. As the condition grew more serious specialist psychiatrists and neurologists were appointed in 1916. Siegfried Sassoon was perhaps its most celebrated victim. One would like to think that Metcalfe’s education and training would have led him to sympathetic treatments such as rest and optimistic diagnosis.

The RAMC certainly served with bravery and its personnel were praised repeatedly in despatches, and won over 1,100 medals for distinguished conduct. Metcalfe’s military cross was one of 1,484 awarded to medical men.

Captain Metcalfe was awarded the Military Cross in June 1917

The Division to which he was attached, (the 49th), was made up of West Riding units including the 1st/4th ‘Duke of Wellington’s Regiment’, (which was the local Cleckheaton Territorial Battalion). It took part in many of the main offensives and Captain Metcalfe must have encountered thousands of wounded soldiers at the sharp end as the Field Ambulances were the first places the wounded and dying were taken for treatment.

Captain Metcalfe visited the school on leave in March, 1917, and grimly warned the editor of the school magazine against any talk of the usual ‘tommy-rot’ about his decoration. Civilians he warned ‘knew nothing, and should not make their friends less friendly’. A blunt warning that the home front knew little of the actuality of war on the western front.

The war diary for the 1st West Riding Field Ambulance Unit notes that John Metcalfe ‘joined for duty on the evening of February 28th 1918’ after a period of home leave due to injuries sustained in 1917. The unit was near Ypres by that time. Within three weeks of his return he was experiencing German gas shells being fired at his field ambulance post. The war diary notes:

17th March 1918. Active enemy shelling, especially back on us, with gas shells.

18th March. Night of 17th to 18th March on Westhoek control post, direct hit by gas shell. Captain Metcalfe gassed.
The diary also notes that the gas was of the ‘mustard gas’ variety. Being a doctor Captain
Metcalfe must have known the effects that the gas would have on him and it seems that he
lived for two days after the shell had landed on his post. Sadly the war diary recorded his
death on March 20th 1918.

20th March 1918. Captain J.C. Metcalfe died at 6-35 am at Casualty Clearing Station.

The school magazine for 1918 noted his death:

‘Captain J.C. Metcalfe MC. RAMC died in action in March. He was gassed last
November and had been at home with a broken leg.’

The magazine did not actually say why he was at home with a broken leg, but Captain
Metcalfe’s file at the National Archive helps to explain why he had such an injury. He was
injured in France on August 31st 1917, but his injuries on this occasion were not
related to any military activity. He apparently broke his leg playing football with other members of his
field ambulance team!

The accident report on his file shows that he had a fracture (sic) of his Fibula and Tibia, and
in the circumstances section of the report the reason for the accident is stated as, ‘Playing
Association Football’. It also added that it was ‘...not in performance of military duty. No
one to blame’.

The report explains the injury with witness statements from those observing at the time, and
also a statement from the soldier who was involved in the tackle:

“I was playing in a football match and was on the opposite side to Captain J. C.
Metcalfe. Whilst dribbling the football down the left wing Captain J. C. Metcalfe made
a rush at the ball and we reached out simultaneously. Captain Metcalfe only grazed the
ball and his left foot came into contact with my right one, thus causing the fracture.

Signed F. Mudd. Driver 1/1 Field Ambulance.

Signed J. Whalley. Lieutenant Colonel 1/1 Field Ambulance”.

The resultant injury cased Captain Metcalfe to endure several medical boards after he was
invalided home from France on September 5th 1917. He embarked for England from
Boulogne on that day. It was two and a half years after his original embarkation for France on
April 12th 1915.

Medical Boards were held for Captain Metcalfe on several occasions in the next few months.
The first of these was at Caxton Hall, London on September 12th 1917, where it was decided
that he should remain in Lady Evelyn Mason’s Hospital. At the outbreak of the First World
War Lady Evelyn Mason had opened a Hospital for Officers at 16 Bruton Street, off Berkeley
Square in London. It had 30 beds, which were all occupied by December 1914. Captain
Metcalfé spent his first days back in England at the hospital.
The next medical board for Captain Metcalfe was on November 13th 1917, again at Caxton Hall London. The recommendation here was that there had been some delay in moving home, but that he was still at Lady Evelyn Mason’s Hospital and that he was now ‘...recommended for travelling to the north’.

When Captain Metcalfe was transferred to ‘the north’ he had to undergo two further medical boards to assess his fitness to return to duty. Both of these were held at the Furness Military Hospital in Harrogate. The first of these was on January 15th 1918 and the second was on February 5th 1918. The latter board was told that Captain Metcalfe could now walk for five miles without any difficulty and it concluded that he should be granted three more weeks of leave, to expire on February 26th 1918. By February 28th 1918 his unit reported in their war diary that he was back with them in France!

Returning to the front after being granted an extension of leave to recover was certainly a heroic gesture, and probably in keeping with the personality of a soldier who had already been awarded the Military Cross for his service. Though his death came on March 20th 1918, his medal card record in the National Archive records ‘Dec’d 20-3-1916’ some two years earlier. The ‘Old Boys News’ section of the magazine added that:

‘Cliff will be remembered as one of that group of six who took the Senior Local together and cleared the Leeds ‘Matric’ in one go. At school he was a most consistent worker on the field a troublesome right outsider and a good fast bowler; as a member of the O. B. Committee he used to bring teams against the school and never missed coming over when he had a chance. He was a good pal and it is difficult to realise we’ll have no more pow wows.’

John Metcalfe had written a will leaving his effects to his father, but unfortunately he had predeceased him and his mother Grace Hollings Metcalfe was left to bring administration proceedings to deal with his estate. The War Office had to deal with hundreds of thousands of deceased soldiers’ effects in the First World War and Captain Metcalfe was no exception. At first the clerks in the department made the mistake of crediting what monies he had coming to him to the estate of another officer, a Captain G. C. Metcalfe.

A minute on the file of the officer shows the amount of work needed to complete the effects of each soldier who had died in foreign climes. There was to be a payment of £255-1s-9d to the Captain’s mother. This was noted as being made up of the following.

**Gratuity under articles 496 and 497 of Royal Warrant for pay ...................£240-5s-0d.**

- **Pay for period 1=20/3/18.** ....................£15-10s-0d
- **Cash found amongst effects** ....................£5-5s-6d.
- **Allowances for period 6/2 – 20/3/18** ..................£13-13s-11d.
- **Travelling expenses for period 26-28/2/1918** .....................£1-0-0d.
Less Income Tax ..........................................................£20-12s-8d.

Total ..........................................................£255-1s-9d.

It was left to Clifford Metcalfe’s mother, with the help of Chadwick and Co, Solicitors, of Dewsbury to finally retrieve the money owed to the officer by the War Office. As with many of the deceased soldiers from the war it took many months and several letters to the War Office, perhaps understandable when one considers the numbers of deaths they were dealing with.

A form on Captain Metcalfe’s file. ‘Form 2090A Report of Death Form’ wrongly gives the date of his death as March 20th 1916. The report is attributed to the Officer Commanding 3rd Canadian Casualty Clearing Station. He was obviously under pressure and had written the wrong year on his report. This explains the date of his death entered on his medal record card.

Captain John Clifford Metcalfe, MC. was buried in Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery in Belgium. The sentiment ‘God Giveth This Beloved Sleep’ is engraved on the headstone. During the First World War, the village of Lijssenthoek was situated on the main communication line between the Allied military bases in the rear and the Ypres battlefields. Close to the Front, but out of the extreme range of most German field artillery, it became a natural place to establish casualty clearing stations.

The cemetery was first used by the French ‘15th Hopital D’Evacuation’ and in June 1915, it began to be used by casualty clearing stations of the Commonwealth forces. Between April and August 1918, the casualty clearing stations fell back ahead of the German advance and field ambulances (including a French ambulance) took their places.

The British Medical Journal of April 6th 1918 recorded the deaths of many officers of the Royal Army Medical Corps in the weeks before. It also recorded the deaths of medical students and the sons of ‘medical men’. Captain Metcalfe was one of the officers who were remembered in that issue:


Captain John Clifford Metcalfe, M.C., R.A.M.C. (T.F.), was reported to have died of wounds, in the casualty list published on March 27th. He was educated at Leeds University, and after graduating M.B. and Ch.B. with first class honours in 1912, went into practice at Liversedge, Yorkshire. He joined the 1st West Riding (Leeds) Field Ambulance as lieutenant on October 13th, 1914, and received the Military Cross on June 3rd, 1917.

The Leeds University Roll of Honour records that John Metcalfe was a student at Batley Grammar School before coming to Leeds University and pays a compliment to the school for the quality of its students in the first decade of the twentieth century. It notes:
‘Captain J.C. Metcalfe, M.C., R.A.M.C., elder son of Mr. and Mrs. J.R. Metcalfe, of Eastfield, Liversedge, has died of wounds received in France. He was a distinguished scholar at Batley Grammar School in one of its most brilliant periods. In 1907 he entered the University of Leeds, and graduated in 1912’.

Captain John Clifford ‘Cliff’ Metcalfe is remembered on memorials at Batley Grammar School, Christ Church, Liversedge, St Saviour’s Church at Norristhorpe and Heckmondwike. The Roll of Honour at Leeds University bears a full tribute to him as well as including his name on the panels of the memorial in the Brotherton Library there.

In Cliff Metcalfe we have yet another example of the power of the post-war belief in ‘a lost generation’.

Lijsenhoek Military Cemetery, Belgium.