

Major-General Sir Roy Redgrave



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Soldier who won the MC saving one of his men and was later Commander of British Forces in Hong Kong

It would be pointless to pretend other than that Roy Redgrave could give a startling impression on first acquaintance. His relationship to the Redgrave acting family — Sir Michael was his father's half-brother — might lead one to expect a certain theatrical air, but he was distinctly mannered in stance and speech, especially speech. Those who thought he might be joking discovered he spoke in no other way and there was more than a touch of steel about him.

He won his Military Cross in most honourable circumstances — saving one of his men from death under fire. In the closing days of the war in Europe the 1st Household Cavalry Regiment, in which he was an armoured car troop commander, was providing part of the reconnaissance screen for the Guards Armoured Division during the advance from Bremen to the old Hanseatic port of Stade on the Elbe Estuary.

His troop was ordered to pause on the outskirts of a village until another troop caught up to allow the advance to continue. Redgrave climbed out and was using a rear wheel for a purpose for which rear wheels are sometimes used when two Panzerfaust rockets hit the car. From the ditch, he saw his second car reversing at speed into the village and his own on

fire with the head of the radio operator moving in the turret. Despite some well-aimed bursts of Spandau fire, he climbed back on to the burning vehicle, got hold of the operator under his armpits and dragged him out on to the engine cover where Redgrave was hit in the leg. The pair rolled off the car into the ditch, from where he established that the driver of the car was dead and the radio operator had lost a leg.

After making the wounded man as comfortable as he could, Redgrave crawled back to the village via the ditch, brought out a half-track to recover the casualty, withdrew the rest of his troop under vigorous enemy fire and only then reported to the regimental aid post to have his wound dressed.

Roy Michael Frederick Redgrave was the son of Robin Roy Redgrave and his wife Micheline Capsa. He was born in the Athénée Palace Hotel, Bucharest, where his mother — the daughter of a Romanian general — checked in with just minutes to spare before her confinement. His early boyhood was spent at the Capsa country home at Doftana, some 60 miles north of the capital, where his father owned a company carrying out contract drilling for oil companies in Romania.

He was educated at Sherborne and enlisted in the Royal Horse Guards (The Blues) in 1943 as a trooper. He volunteered in order to get into the war before it was over without any thought of becoming a professional soldier. Indeed, after the incident in which his armoured car was incinerated he characteristically remarked: “I had my whiff of war and did not ever want to smell it again.” But he found he liked the life, served in postwar Germany with the Royal Horse Guards patrolling the demarcation line between the British and Soviet zones of occupied Germany and became interested in the gathering of intelligence.

It is unlikely that after attending the Canadian Staff College course at Kingston, Ontario, Redgrave’s card was marked to suggest he might one day become a general. He was certainly enterprising but his refreshing disregard for the concerns of higher authority seemed likely to become a stumbling block. But his uninhibited approach and undoubted charm came to his aid as he advanced up the military tree at a brisk pace. He commanded a squadron of The Blues in Cyprus during the Eoka terrorist campaign and was mentioned in dispatches, served as the military assistant to the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe and commanded the Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment in London all without serious mishap. It was while commanding the Mounted Regiment that he acquired the nickname “Colonel Daffodil” due, so he recounted in his lighthearted autobiography *Balkan Blue* published in 2000, to the insistence of his wife’s miniature Pekinese named Daffodil preceding him on barrack inspection.

The post of Commander RAC of the 3rd Division in the rank of brigadier provided fresh opportunity to display his talent for staged productions. He revived the Tidworth Tattoo, Wiltshire, attracting huge crowds, and the Tidworth three-day event. His concern that the Army should maintain close touch with the local community and its interests was further demonstrated when, as commander of the Royal Armoured Corps training centre in Bovington, Dorset, he arranged for footpaths across the ranges — closed for half a century — to be opened to the public. His final two appointments in the Army were both exceptionally high profile and regarded as being among the plums of major-generals’ commands: Berlin and Hong Kong. In fact he was well suited to the former appointment as he spoke fluent French, German and Russian. News of his appointment was greeted by the Berlin press with a front-page photograph of him in uniform alongside one of his half-cousin Vanessa

Redgrave posing naked — from the film *Blow-Up*. He took this in his stride and, in a Berlin then still divided by the hated wall and with tenuous lines of communication through East Germany to the outside world, proved a commandant well liked and respected by the Allied garrison and population alike. When the chimney of his Berlin house — the Villa Lemm — caught fire he put it out by climbing on the roof. The Berlin press gave the incident front-page coverage illustrated by a photograph of him together with another of a topless young lady with no relevance to him or to the incident.

He was the first Commander of British Forces Hong Kong in recent times below the rank of lieutenant general and not already knighted. This called for some aplomb in a highly prosperous community very conscious of style and position. No one could say that Redgrave lacked self-confidence or a certain style. He may have been rather different from what Hong Kong had grown used to in its local general but his appointment as KBE on giving up the job was widely welcomed.

In retirement he threw himself into a variety of work and travel. He was Grand Master of the Knights Templar for a time; he was chairman of the Hammersmith & Fulham Health Authority and the Charing Cross Hospital special trustees. He travelled to China, Tibet and Greenland and, in 1999, he and his surviving sister returned to their childhood home at Doftana to find it a dilapidated summer home for children but both recaptured the magic of their childhood in the Carpathians.

He married Valerie, daughter of Major Arthur Wellesley, in 1953, died last year. He is survived by two sons.

Major-General Sir Roy Redgrave, KBE, MC, Commander British Forces Hong Kong 1978-80, was born on September 16, 1925. He died on July 3, 2011, aged 85

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