

## **MAJ. GEN. HENRY MICHAEL TILLOTSON CB CBE (12/5/1928 – 17/5/2023)**

### **Heathcote (1939 – 1946)**

**Yorkshire Soldier who wrote Field Marshal Lord Bramall's authorised biography and was the Times military obituarist for 30 years**

Micky Tillotson liked to say that it was writing obituaries for The Times that kept him alive. For 30 years he recorded the exploits of generals and spies, as well as those in more junior ranks who had won medals for bravery, giving up only two years ago at the age of 93, when his eyesight began to fail.

His phenomenal memory and filing cabinet of a mind, as well as his actual physical files, bulged with biographical and historical detail, garnered from prodigious correspondence and love of military "gossip". As both a seasoned field soldier and a staff officer with a capacity for taking pains, his obituaries, both well informed and well judged, were almost invariably well received.

Henry Michael (Micky) Tillotson was born in Keighley, Yorkshire, in 1928, the elder son of Henry Tillotson, an executive of the Yorkshire Bank, and his wife, May. He trained enthusiastically with the cadet corps at Chesterfield School during the Second World War, in the expectation of eventually seeing action, but the war ended before he could enter the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst.

Commissioned in 1948, he experienced consequences of the war instead, on occupation duties in Austria with 1st Battalion The East Yorkshire Regiment (1 E York). The "East Yorks", despite their leading role on D-Day and some literary distinction from Winifred Holtby's novel South Riding, were not a fashionable regiment, but Tillotson considered himself lucky to be commissioned into any Yorkshire regiment at all, as he had not performed especially well at Sandhurst. Though tall, lean and fit he was neither an athlete nor a games player. Nor was he much interested in field sports, and his habit of speaking candidly and without invitation had not endeared him to the staff at the academy. It was his good fortune, however, that the adjutant of 1 E York was Geoffrey Powell, a Green Howards officer who had won the Military Cross at Arnhem with the Parachute Regiment, and who would later work in counterespionage at M15 and become a noted author and historian. Powell recognised the then Lieutenant Tillotson's potential, made him his assistant and became a mentor.

In 1953, Tillotson, a good French linguist, gained his first experience of action while on attachment to the Foreign Legion in Vietnam, then part of what was known as French Indochina. Advancing across dry paddy fields during an offensive in the northern delta, Tillotson's unit were counterattacked by a regular Viet Minh regiment, supported by machineguns from high ground on the flanks. The legion suffered badly but Tillotson was astounded by the officers' refusal to take cover, as they regarded it as dishonourable to show concern for enemy fire. The Viet Minh were only halted by a combination of artillery and air-to-ground fire, and Tillotson watched on grimly as some 40 Legion dead were slung in bundles of ten on light tanks for evacuation. For his own conduct, Tillotson was awarded the Croix de Guerre with palm.

Three years later he married Angela Wadsworth Shaw, an actress. They had a daughter, Miranda, a jewelry expert for a West Country auction house, and two sons: Giles, an art historian who lives in India, and Hugo, a dealer in commercial property.

Not long afterwards, Angela reportedly saved her husband from what might have been a career-ending presentation at the staff college in Camberley, one in which he argued the impracticality of the recently adopted Nato strategy in Europe of “nuclear defence of a river line”. Tillotson, who had never served in the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) but whose service elsewhere, including the Malayan Emergency, convinced him that the strategy was dangerous posturing, had not told the directing staff what he intended to say. It almost cost him his position, but Angela was the lead in the all-important pantomime, an annual event attracting a high-ranking external audience, and he was spared the axe.

Undaunted, he wrote an article for an army journal on the same subject, but publication was barred. The marriage was later dissolved and in 2006 he married Sybil Osborne, his companion of many years. She survives him with the children of his first marriage and two stepsons: James, an IT specialist; and William, a writer and poet.

Tillotson returned to the Far East in the Sixties, during Indonesia’s “confrontation” with Malaysia, serving on the staff in Singapore. When intelligence suggested that the Indonesian Air Force was about to bomb the island’s British base, he organised the dispersal of ammunition and material by barge to dumps on the Malay coast. When questioned later about the expense, he replied that he would rather be court-martialled for acting on intelligence than for not acting on intelligence.

In 1967 he returned to regimental duty, in South Arabia, with The Prince of Wales’s Own Regiment of Yorkshire (PWO), as the East Yorks had become following their amalgamation with the West Yorks in 1958. He was in temporary command of the 1PWO following the withdrawal of British forces to the port of Aden in what is now Yemen, when the Marxist National Liberation Front attempted to cut off the military and government headquarters from the rest of the besieged colony. A prolonged fire-fight ensued, during which the battalion’s radio net was jammed probably by a Russian trawler in the harbour, but the attempt was foiled. Tillotson was mentioned in dispatches.

On return to England that year, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel to head the MoD intelligence staff responsible for monitoring the Warsaw Pact, the branch which featured in Dennis Potter's series *Lipstick on Your Collar* (1993), starring Ewan McGregor. The job brought him into contact with the intelligence staffs of NATO allies and the CIA, resulting in Tillotson's lasting interest in the World of espionage.

The following year, Washington invited a UK delegation for a briefing on satellite intelligence, then at an early stage. Expecting at least the director of service intelligence and perhaps a minister, the CIA were nonplused when Tillotson, still a novice in “G2” matters, turned up instead. Nevertheless, he was well received and on his return to London instigated a joint study, with the CIA, on a Soviet military district of special interest. When Moscow decided to crush the Czechs’ Prague Spring in August 1968, UK and US intelligence agencies had plotted the position of every unit poised for the invasion.

Command of 1PWO followed, but opportunity for active service was curtailed by a move to Cyprus. The battalion enjoyed two years in the sun but Tillotson did not make the expected career move to brigade command. Instead he was promoted to colonel as chief of staff in Hong Kong.

This proved fortunate, however, for the commander in Hong Kong was Lieutenant General Sir Edwin (later Field Marshal Lord) Bramall (obit. 2019). “Dwin” Bramall was noted for requiring little advice and being suspicious of any that he did need. However he came to respect Tillotson’s operational

experience, eye for detail and willingness to stand his ground, resulting in a lifelong friendship. After two years Tillotson was advanced to become chief of staff of the United Nations force in Cyprus.

The Turkish invasion in 1974 had left a 125-mile front between the opposing Greek Cypriot and Turkish Armies from the northwest to Famagusta on the east coast. Tillotson was acting force commander when the UN secretary-general Kurt Waldheim visited Cyprus to encourage a final peace settlement. On leaving, Waldheim asked Tillotson to write a paper on how peacekeeping operations could be more efficient and less expensive, and sent him to visit the then four peace-keeping missions. His tours of Lebanon, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsular resulted in the number of national contingents in each force being reduced, with no loss of operational capacity.

Later, as deputy director of Army Staff Duties in the MoD, Tillotson was advisor to the cabinet committee dealing with military aid in maintaining essential services during the 1978-79 “winter of discontent”. He was promoted major general and chief of staff at the UK land Forces headquarters in Wilton in 1980. When Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands two years later, a force based on 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade was cobbled together to garrison the islands once the Royal Navy and Royal Marines had wrested back control. Tillotson persuaded the commander-in-chief, Sir John Stanier, a “BAOR warrior” who had seen no active service, to let him remonstrate with Bramall, by now chief of the general staff, to allow the brigade a few weeks of training first, arguing that they may be needed to fight. Bramall conceded, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade did indeed fight.

After leaving the army to become the South East Asia director of international military services, an MoD agency, Tillotson wrote Bramall’s authorised biography, *The Fifth Pillar*, and later edited two volumes of obituaries for The Times: *Great Military Lives* and *SOE and the Resistance*. Latterly he lived in Wiltshire, where he enjoyed bird watching and music.

Tillotson remained at heart a regimental soldier, delighting in his Yorkshire soldier’s wit, frankness and stoicism, and from 1979 to 1986 was (honorary) colonel of the PWO. He enjoyed relating the quintessential story of running over a python while driving his “jeep” at night in Malaya. The snake reared up, lashing both sides of the flimsy canopy, causing his radio operator in the back to remark: “Don’t stop sir, I think he’s all right.”

Major General H M Tillotson, CB, CBE, soldier and writer, was born on May 12, 1928. He died on May 17, 2023, aged 95.

*Courtesy of The Times, May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2023*