

General Sir John Winthrop Hackett

Memorial Address, St Martins in the Fields

24 November 1997

It is rather unusual to have the memorial address for a General delivered by a Professor, but then Shan was a very unusual General. Sometimes he liked to pretend that he was not, or rather should not have been, a General at all. He used to tell his academic colleagues at Kings that his military career was simply the result of forty years absence of mind - a statement that never carried great conviction with any of them. He certainly established his scholarly credentials by taking a research degree at a time when this was very unfashionable even for dons, and ended his career as one of the most senior academics in the country, but I doubt whether he would have got to the top by slogging up the academic ladder. Success in academic life demands long hours of solitary and unrewarding labour, and a great capacity to endure boredom. The one thing that Shan could not bear was being bored. What really put him to the test during his long and active life were not the dangers and hardships of war. Those he happily confronted and welcomed. No: it was the long months of inactivity that he spent hiding in Holland, with nothing to read except his Bible, slowly convalescing under the very eyes of the enemy. It was an experience that he has chronicled in one of the most moving books ever written about the Second World War - or indeed any war. It changed him from being an adventurous but I suspect rather a bumptious young man into a mature leader whose self-confidence was supported and moderated by a profound Christian faith.

Aversion to boredom was one clue to Shan's character. Another - and here I hope I will not be accused of racism - was his background. He was Australian, and Australian of a certain generation. He came from the uppermost crust of Australian society, but he had not been ground down between the upper millstone of an English public school and the nether millstone of Sandhurst into a model of suave self-effacement. He never lost his determination to show the Poms that anything they could do he could do better, whether it was riding to hounds, reading Greek, or simply making war. More than that: deep inside him - or perhaps not so very deep, because one could always see it in those twinkling blue eyes - there lurked a strain of pure Irish; a spirit of sheer mischievousness, a delight in stirring things up. It made him a delightful friend, an inspiring leader, but sometimes a far from ideal colleague, especially in the corridors of Whitehall.

For a man of Shan's character the Second World War seemed to come at an ideal moment; but sadly it was to prove an anticlimax, rather than an apotheosis. It began brilliantly with his service in the Transjordanian Frontier Force, where he was able to fight a very Lawrence-of-Arabia kind of war. His superiors rode him on a very loose rein - if indeed they ever had the faintest idea where he was and what he was doing - and he could use his knowledge of Arabic, French and Italian to operate freely in a world of adventure more familiar to young British officers in the nineteenth century than in the twentieth. There followed the months in the Western Desert. There again he did predictably well, was marked for rapid preferment, and was entrusted, in his early 'thirties, with the formation of his own parachute brigade. Then for eighteen months he nurtured it and trained it to perfection, until it was put to the test at Arnhem in September 1944. Then, as he sadly remarked, having been the midwife of the brigade, he became its sexton. In a few hours he saw it shredded to pieces, and he had to begin his own long, lonely ordeal. By the time he emerged from that, the war was effectively over.

For many officers, however glittering their wartime record, a career in the post-war army, especially one passed entirely in the European theatre, could be uneventful, if not tedious. Not so with Shan.

For him each new command was a challenge to which he brought an unrelenting quest for perfection combined with an iconoclastic questioning of the conventional wisdom. He fizzed with energy and ideas and was as intolerant of intellectual laziness as of military backslidings. He did not suffer fools gladly, and his definition of a fool was more catholic than most. He must have been a wonderful man to serve under. His rebukes, however ferocious, were always well-deserved, and his kindness to young officers and their wives - was proverbial. But his equals, and even more his superiors, he regarded as fair game for his intellectual swordsmanship. It says as much for the wisdom and tolerance of the British Army as it does for his own abilities, that Shan was able to rise as fast and as far as he did.

But the higher he rose, the more scope Shan found for his talents. As a brigade, then divisional, and finally an Army commander in Germany he not only kept the units under his command at the peak of fighting efficiency, but understood that the role of British troops in Germany was as much political and social as it was military. He did an enormous amount, always with Margaret's tactful help, to mould friendly relations, not only between the two armies, but between the two peoples. He also showed himself - somewhat to the alarm of his superiors in Whitehall - to be a skilful and independently-minded political operator, and one quite untrammelled by any nationalistic bias. So his military career ended much as it had begun, but on an altogether vaster scale. His political and linguistic as well as his military talents were fully stretched, but this time not in making war it was in preserving peace.

When we invited him to come to Kings, we hoped not only for a high-profile leader who would burnish up the image of the College, but a skilful bureaucratic in-fighter who could fight our battles within the university as he had fought those of the Army in Whitehall. Shan himself, I think, still had rather a romantic view of academic life. He looked forward to long days of happy research in the British Museum Library, and scholarly conversations with his academic colleagues over the vintage port. He was not given the chance. He arrived at a moment when a wind of student discontent was sweeping through the universities of the West, and Shan unerringly recognised that this was the main problem with which he had to deal. He marched to the sound of the guns. The professors could be left to themselves, which is always the best thing to do with professors. His research had to wait - and, alas, it continued to wait. To their astonishment the students of Kings found that they had a Principal who mingled with them, learned their names, discussed their problems, confounded when necessary their knavish tricks with a skill that left them gasping, and created an oasis of calm in the Strand in which everyone could get on with their work; one that welcomed refugees even from the London School of Economics. But for Shan peace, and eventually retirement, only gave him the chance for ever greater and more widespread activity; as a classicist, as a publicist, as a writer, as a colonel of regiments, as a fisherman, even as a shepherd; a pursuit of happiness, and widely shared happiness, that ended only in death.

It is usual at services such as this to ask God to grant unto his departed servants *requiem aeternam*, perpetual rest. I hope that we won't do that today, because it is the very last thing that Shan would have wanted. If he were welcomed into Heaven with a promise of eternal rest, he would at once apply for a transfer. While it was coming through he would learn the celestial language, correct the grammar of the cherubim, catch out the archangels in solecisms, analyse the workings of the bureaucracy, and offer helpful advice as to how it might be improved. No: let us just hope that somewhere in the Universe there is room for that relentlessly active spirit to be still stirring things up; and , give thanks that our own lives have been enhanced by his activity - genial, demanding, implacable, sometimes mischievous, but always benign.

Michael Howard