

# Maj-Gen Tom Churchill

MAJOR-GENERAL TOM CHURCHILL, former Deputy Chief of Staff, Allied Land Forces Central Europe, who has died aged 82, had a distinguished and varied career in the Commandos, but perhaps his most valuable contribution to winning the Second World War was his expertise in interpreting air photographs.

He had been an instructor in the RAF School of Photography from 1934 to 1939 and ran courses to teach Bomber Command Intelligence Officers how to estimate bomb damage to factories, railway yards and ports. Tom Churchill later assisted in establishing the inter-service interpretation establishment at Medmenham, which was to produce vital information about the German flying bomb (V1).

When the first of these landed in Britain only six days after D-Day it seemed that Hitler's "secret weapon" might change the course of the war, but the unit at Medmenham enabled many of the launching ramps to be identified and destroyed.

Thomas Bell Lindsay Churchill was born Nov 1, 1907, one of three sons of Alec Churchill, formerly of the public works departments of Ceylon and Hong Kong. His elder brother, affectionately known by his troops as "Mad Jack", became another renowned Commando leader; and the younger brother, Buster, joined the Navy and was present at the Invergordon Mutiny in 1931.

In 1941 Buster Churchill transferred to the Fleet Air Arm and was killed in the Mediterranean protecting a Malta convoy in 1942.

These Churchills hailed from Deddington in Oxfordshire, nine miles from Blenheim Palace, but claimed no kinship with the Marlborough family, who were, of course, "new-comers" to the area.

Young Tom was educated at Magdalen College School, Oxford, and won a prize cadetship at Sandhurst, where he passed out sixth and won the Prize Sword for military history. He was commissioned into the Manchester Regiment in 1927 and joined them in Burma.

Their task was to maintain law and order at the time when the Burmans — inveterate gamblers and borrowers — tried to settle their debts to Indian moneylenders with razor-sharp jungle knives.

In 1930 Churchill served in Secunderabad, India, but was recalled to Burma to deal with



a rebel force which was terrorising the remoter villages. He tracked the elusive group through the jungle and after many months eliminated them, killing their leader, the infamous Po-Hla-Gyi, in the process.

He was subsequently mentioned in despatches and awarded the Military Cross. In 1931 he was made adjutant of his regiment — at the age of 24 being the youngest in the Army — and served in the Sudan until 1933.

On the outbreak of the Second World War Churchill went with his regiment as a company commander to France, but was at once appointed to Viscount Gort's Intelligence Staff at HQ BEF at Arras. His brief was to establish an air photographic interpretation section.

In 1940 he returned to England for the course at the Staff College, Camberley, but when the Germans invaded the Low Countries he was hastily recalled and posted to HQ British Air Forces, at Coulommiers. This supported the BEF until Dunkirk and then assisted the French.

He was eventually evacuated from Brest after a 200-mile night drive. Soon after returning to England he joined the Army Commandos.

He had some sharp clashes with Evelyn Waugh, who objected to Churchill's arduous training exercises. Churchill recalled that later Waugh was posted to Combined Operations HQ in Whitehall, but was soon moved to the Royal Horse Guards Depot at Windsor.

"There," the novelist was told by his Commando CO, "you will no doubt be able to display your knowledge of horses."

"My recent experience with mules," replied Waugh, "should stand me in good stead."

In 1943 Churchill took part in the Sicily landings, and then went on to Salerno where he was in action alongside his brother Jack. He succeeded Robert Laycock as commander of the 2nd Commando Brigade and led it at Anzio and at the capture of Mount Ornito in the central highlands.

Subsequently he worked closely with the Partisans in Yugoslavia and guaranteed Tito's safety after he had nearly been captured in a daring parachute raid by the Germans. Following a short period back in England for consultation, Churchill returned to Vis and then, after vigorous training, took the brigade into German-occupied Albania.

After hard fighting they defeated the Germans at Sarande, cut off their retreat to Germany and went on to liberate Corfu. From 1945 to 1946 Churchill commanded 11th and 138th Brigades in Austria, and then became zone commander until 1949.

A period at the War Office ensued before he attended the Imperial Defence College. Following two years on the staff of Western Command at Chester, Churchill was placed in charge of administration at GHQ Far East Land Forces at Singapore, where he took a major part in making the military arrangements for Malayan independence.

From 1957 to 1960 Churchill was Vice-Quartermaster General to the Forces and retired as Deputy Chief of Staff, Allied Land Forces, Europe in 1962. Churchill was Colonel of the Manchester Regiment from 1952 to 1958, and of the King's Regiment from 1960 to 1962. He was also vice-president of the Commando Association and of the British-Yugoslav Society.

He was appointed CBE in 1949 and CB in 1962, and was awarded the Yugoslav Partisan Star with gold wreath.

Tall and fair, and not a type to stand any nonsense from anyone, Tom Churchill was an intelligent and cultured man. He wrote three books, *Manual of Interpretation of Air Photography*, *The Churchill Chronicles*, *Commando Crusade*, and also contributed to various military and archaeological journals. His recreations were genealogy, heraldry and the fine arts.

He is survived by a son and a daughter from his first marriage to the former Gwendolen Janie Williams, who died in 1962.