Voices of War
Life Story

Robert Elliott Urquhart
1901 - 1988

WWII, Army, Robert Elliott Urquhart,1901, Main
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Name: Robert Elliott Urquhart
Other names/aliases: Roy
Date of birth: 28 November 1901
Place of birth: London, England
Nationality: British
Date of death: 13 December 1988
Place of death: Port of Menteith, Tayside, Scotland

Service No: 17550

Rank: Major-General

Unit: Highland Light Infantry
commands:
- British Troops in Austria (1952–1955)
- Malaya Command (1950–1952)
- 51st/52nd Scottish Division (1948–1950)
- 16th Airborne Division (1947–1948)
- 1st Airborne Division (1944–1945)
- 231st Infantry Brigade (1943)
- 2nd Battalion, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (1941–1942)

Medals and awards: Distinguished Service Order (DSO); Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB); Bronze Lion (Netherlands); Order of St. Olav (Norway); Campaign Medals (WWII): 1939-1945 Star, Africa Star, Italy Star, France and Germany Star, Defence Medal, and War Medal 1939-1945

Education & Employment: Stowe College; Royal Military College, Sandhurst.

Life Story

Early Life and Family

Robert Elliott Urquhart was born to parents Isobel and Alexander, both of Scottish heritage but by the time of his birth living in London. His father is listed as a physician and surgeon on the 1911 census. Roy grew up in a disciplined, professional household, which likely influenced his methodical approach to life and leadership.

He was educated at Stowe School and later attended the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, where he trained to become a British Army officer.

Military Service

Urquhart was commissioned as a second lieutenant into the 1st Battalion, Highland Light Infantry on 24 December 1920. He was promoted to lieutenant on 24 December 1922 and to captain on 26 March 1929. From 1933 to 1936, he served with the 2nd Battalion while stationed in Malta, where he also held the role of adjutant. During this period, he became friends with the actor David Niven, who later described him in his autobiography The Moon's a Balloon as "a serious soldier of great charm and warmth."

Urquhart attended the Staff College at Camberley from 1936 to 1937 before returning to the 2nd Battalion, then commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Horatio Berney-Ficklin, which was deployed in Palestine during the Arab revolt. On 1 August 1938, he was promoted to major and subsequently sent out to India as a staff officer. In May 1939, he was appointed Deputy Assistant Quartermaster-General at Army Headquarters in India.

With the outbreak of World War II, Roy Urquhart's military career advanced rapidly. In September 1939 he was still serving in India, and he was to remain there until 1941 before being posted to North Africa. He was subsequently recalled to the United Kingdom to serve as a staff officer with the 3rd Infantry Division.

Urquhart was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and took command of the 2nd Battalion, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. In 1942 he served as a staff officer in the 51st (Highland) Infantry Division, initially stationed in the UK and later deployed to North Africa.

Urquhart was appointed brigadier of the 231st Infantry Brigade, after his return from North Africa. The Brigade became part of the Allied forces pushing up through Sicily and into mainland Italy, a campaign that tested his tactical skill and leadership under some of the most challenging conditions of the war.

The Italian Campaign was defined by difficult terrain: rugged mountains, narrow valleys, and heavily fortified enemy positions. Urquhart's brigade often had to navigate steep ridges and river crossings while facing determined German defenders. He quickly gained a reputation for meticulous planning and personal courage, frequently moving to the front lines to coordinate attacks and reassure his soldiers. He had a "lead from the front" style which would often see him in a jeep with just a radio and his batman for company, driving off to assess the front line situations. This tactic was not without risk however, and during his time in Italy nearly ended in disaster after he came under attack on one such sortie, and a member of his jeep was killed and his intelligence officer badly injured.

During the Sicilian landings, Urquhart's brigade played a key role in capturing strategic towns and securing vital supply routes. He demonstrated an ability to adapt rapidly to changing battlefield conditions, coordinating with infantry, artillery, and engineers to overcome obstacles such as minefields, destroyed bridges, and entrenched enemy positions.

As the campaign moved into mainland Italy, his leadership was further

tested during the assaults on the Apennine Mountains. German forces had fortified key positions around Monte Cassino and other critical passes, creating deadly choke points. Urquhart emphasized careful reconnaissance, coordinated artillery barrages, and the use of specialized mountain units to dislodge the defenders. His personal presence on the frontlines inspired confidence among the troops, who saw their commander sharing the same risks they faced.

Colleagues and subordinates often noted his calm demeanour under fire. Even amid heavy casualties and logistical challenges, Urquhart maintained order, morale, and a clear focus on the overall objectives. These experiences honed his skills in coordinating complex operations and dealing with chaotic, high-pressure environments—a preparation that would prove invaluable later at Arnhem.

By the time he left Italy, Urquhart had earned the respect of both his men and his peers for his combination of tactical acumen, personal bravery, and unwavering dedication to the welfare of his soldiers. The lessons learned in the mountains and valleys of Italy shaped his command style: decisive yet compassionate, always aware of the human cost of warfare.

Upon his return, Urquhart was appointed as a staff officer to XII Corps. In 1944, before he was unexpectedly given command of the 1st Airborne Division—a challenging assignment, as he suffered from airsickness and had no prior experience with airborne forces. Nevertheless, he was selected to led the division during Operation Market Garden in September 1944, demonstrating his adaptability and leadership under extreme pressure.

Operation Market Garden – Arnhem (17–25 September 1944)

Men of the 1st Airborne in 1944, Urquhart is in the centre on the bottom row.

17 September – The Landing

Urquhart landed with the 1st Airborne Division near Arnhem on 17 September, and almost immediately the scale of the challenge became clear. German resistance was stronger than intelligence had predicted, and while a small part of the division reached the crucial bridge over the Lower Rhine, much of the force was scattered across the Dutch countryside. With communications unreliable, Urquhart once again climbed into a jeep to assess the progress of the 1st Airlanding Brigade. Finding Brigadier Hicks' headquarters was a challenge in itself, and when he finally arrived he was mistakenly told that the Reconnaissance Jeep Squadron—planned to spearhead a mobile assault on the Arnhem bridge—had failed to arrive. Though this was incorrect, the misinformation forced Urquhart to rethink his approach, and he decided instead to task one of Brigadier Gerald Lathbury's battalions with seizing the bridge.

Returning to his headquarters but still unable to establish wireless contact

with the reconnaissance unit, Urquhart disappeared once again in search of them. At the same time, the squadron was also looking for him, and in the confusion he was out of contact for some time, whereabouts unknown. Eventually he reached Lieutenant-Colonel John Frost's 2nd Battalion headquarters, where he also came across Lieutenant-Colonel Fitch's 3rd Battalion and Brigadier Lathbury. Concerned that the Utrechtseweg road might already be in German hands, Urquhart and Lathbury chose to remain overnight with Fitch and the 3rd Battalion.

Both commanders were increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of the 1st Brigade's advance toward the bridge, though little could be done to hasten events. Lathbury's decision to halt his brigade that evening would prove to have major consequences, shaping the desperate, house-to-house fighting that erupted in Arnhem the following day.

18 September – Advancing Towards Arnhem

Confusion escalated on the next day as Major General Urquhart remained missing. He had neglected to properly communicate the line of succession to his officers, sharing the information only with his Chief of Staff, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Mackenzie. As a result, when Urquhart didn't return on the morning of September 18, Brigadier Hicks took command of the 1st Airborne Division. This decision caused friction with Brigadier John Hackett, who felt his commission date entitled him to the position. Unbeknownst to them, Urquhart's actual choice was Brigadier Pip Lathbury, who was still with the 3rd Battalion. At the same time, increasing German patrols forced Urquhart and his companions, Taylor and Cleminson, to seek refuge in a nearby house (shown below).

They were trapped in the attic for another 24 hours when a German self-propelled gun parked right in front of the house.

19–21 September – The Siege Tightens

The first opportunity for Urquhart's escape came in the early hours of Tuesday, September 19, when men from the 2nd South Staffords advanced into the area during the ill-fated 1st Battalion breakthrough. The influx of British paratroopers near the St. Elisabeth Hospital forced the German self-propelled gun to leave, clearing the way for Urquhart. Upon reaching his division's headquarters, he discovered a situation rapidly falling apart and bordering on unsalvageable. The day, now known as "Black Tuesday," concluded with a sense of utter hopelessness.

By Wednesday the 20th, the 1st Airborne Division was too depleted to mount a rescue attempt for Frost's men at the bridge. Eight of their nine infantry battalions were either badly damaged or scattered, leaving only the 1st Battalion, The Border Regiment as a cohesive fighting force. Faced with this grim reality, Urquhart made the difficult decision to abandon the 2nd Parachute Battalion to their fate.

Urquhart hoped to hold out by forming a defensive perimeter around Oosterbeek and securing the Driel ferry crossing, waiting for XXX Corps to reach them and establish a new bridgehead across the Rhine. The day's supply drop was no more successful than the previous one. Despite a message reaching Britain to arrange a new drop zone near the Hotel Hartenstein, some aircraft still flew to the original drop zone (LZ 'Z'), where their supplies were captured by the Germans. Meanwhile, at Oosterbeek, the Germans used British marker panels and flares to trick the aircraft, making it nearly impossible for the pilots to distinguish the correct drop zones. Of the 164 aircraft involved, ten were shot down, and only a meagre 13 percent of the supplies reached the British.

Urquhart finally managed to contact Frost at the bridge, delivering the grim news that reinforcements were unlikely to get through. Frost was wounded shortly after, and command passed to Major Gough. All British resistance at the bridge ceased by 5:00 a.m. on Thursday morning.

22–24 September – Holding the Line

Delayed by the weather, Stanisław Sosabowski's 1st (Polish) Parachute Brigade finally took off on Friday 22nd. Of the 114 C-47s, 41 turned back, but the rest pressed on despite communication issues. A message from Arnhem, warning the Poles that their planned drop zone (DZ 'K') was not secure, instructed them to land instead on the polder east of Driel and secure the Heveadorp ferry on the south bank of the Rhine.

The Poles dropped under fire at 17:00, suffering some casualties but assembling in good order. Upon reaching the river, they found the ferry had been sunk by its operator to prevent its use by the Germans.

The arrival of the Poles relieved some of the pressure on the British, as the Germans were forced to divert troops south of the Rhine. Unable to contact the Poles by radio, a runner swam across the river to ask them to wait for rafts to cross and reinforce the men in the Oosterbeek perimeter, where heavy fighting continued and casualties were quickly mounting at aid posts.

Meanwhile, General Bittrich ordered a major offensive to destroy the British bridgehead. At 09:00, attacks began from all sides, but the Germans made only small gains. However, simultaneous attacks in the afternoon proved more effective, forcing the King's Own Scottish Borderers to briefly fall back before they counter-attacked and retook their positions. Recognizing the futility of holding a tactically unimportant position, Urquhart ordered his northern units to fall back and establish a shorter defensive line.

The same day, two of Urquhart's staff officers swam the Rhine again to arrange for six rubber boats to be sent from the north bank to allow the Poles to cross. However, the cable meant to guide the boats broke, and the current was too strong. Only 55 Poles managed to cross before morning, and only 35 of those made it into the perimeter.

Saturday 23rd sae Urquhart and his men endure further pressure as German attacks shifted south, aiming to push the British away from the river and crush any hope of reinforcement or escape. Though these assaults failed to break the perimeter, they relentlessly wore down

the defences and further depleted the division's meagre supplies.

A crucial break in the weather finally allowed the RAF to provide air support. Typhoons and Thunderbolts flew continuous combat missions, strafing German positions throughout the day and even engaging in dogfights with the Luftwaffe. On Saturday afternoon, the RAF attempted one last resupply flight from Britain, but the mission was a costly failure, with eight aircraft lost and little benefit to the men on the ground.

Above: The famous photo of Urquhart in front of the Hartenstein Hotel.

South of the river, the Poles prepared for another attempt at a crossing. The assault boats from XXX Corps, which Urquhart had been desperately counting on, were delayed until after midnight, and many arrived without oars. Despite these setbacks and with fire support from the 43rd Wessex Division, the crossings began at 03:00. However, in the remaining hours of darkness, only 153 men managed to get across—a frustratingly small fraction of the reinforcements Urquhart needed to save the bridgehead.

25 September – Evacuation

By 25 September, it was clear that the position could not be held indefinitely. Urquhart coordinated the final defensive efforts and the safe withdrawal of the remaining troops as part of Operation Berlin. This withdrew the remaining men across the Rhine overnight on the 25-26 September to Driel. The men followed the white ribbon laid out to guide their way to the river where boats provided by British and Canadian engineers were waiting for them.

Of the 10,000 men who had landed at Arnhem, only around 2,163 were successfully evacuated.

“I took ten thousand men into Arnhem. I’ve come out with less than two. I don’t feel much like sleeping.”

Despite numerous attempts to analyze the failures of the operation in Oosterbeek and Arnhem in the subsequent years, nothing can diminish the determination and bravery of the men who fought there, nor the immense difficulty of command under such dire circumstances.

Post-War Life

After the war ended, Urquhart continued his service with the British Army for a number of years, becoming Director of the Territorial Army and Army Cadet Force at the War Office. He was then made General Officer Commanding, of the newly raised Territorial Army 16th Airborne Division in 1947. This was followed by command of the 51st/52nd Scottish Division until 1950. He was subsequently appointed as the General Officer Commanding Malaya Command during the Malayan Emergency and GOC-in-C British Troops in Austria.

He eventually retired in 1955 with the rank of Major General. He devoted himself to his family, raising his four children with his wife. His daughter Elspeth married the prominent politician Menzies Campbell, while Suki Urquhart became an author and gardening expert.

He maintained connections with veteran organizations and took part in commemorations of Operation Market Garden. His experiences were frequently cited in military histories, documentaries, and interviews.

Urquhart lived a relatively private life after retiring from active service but remained an influential figure in British military history. He witnessed the impact of his leadership at Arnhem becoming part of the wider public consciousness, particularly through the 1977 film A Bridge Too Far, in which Sean Connery portrayed him.

Roy Urquhart passed away in 1988, leaving a legacy of courage, leadership, and dedication to his men and country. He is remembered as a commander who embodied personal courage, resilience, and tactical acumen. His ability to maintain morale and cohesion under extreme adversity made him one of the iconic figures of airborne operations in

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