

Brigadier William Francis Allan Findlay OBE

We are in St Giles church, that means so much to the Findlay family, to say goodbye to Allan.

We give thanks for the enjoyment and fun we all experienced in his friendship; for his dedication to the service and help to others and for setting in his humorous, charming and relaxed way an example of behaviour that has inspired generations of fellow officers, many of whom are here today.

On a beautiful autumn morning such as this full of colours it is easy to understand why Allan and Bumble moved to Graffham in 1982, when they unpacked for the last time those wooden Army boxes, many bearing the bruises (and breakages no doubt) of postings to and from Rhine Army, Fort Leavenworth in America and to Singapore as well as moves the length and breadth of the UK.

After 35 years of Army life Allan delighted in everything that Graffham offered and especially the prospect of establishing a permanent home and base for Bumble and himself, for Giles and Ollie and the grandchildren, to all of whom he was a devoted husband, father and grandfather.

For 9 years Allan worked for MEL, a Defence contractor, at Crawley and then he became a county councillor – a role, for which his intellect, willingness to serve and concern for the welfare of others equipped him well. As Chairman of the Governors of Easeburn (Esbun) school near here he relished, too, his contacts with the younger generation and local people and was proud of masterminding a much needed building project.

His garden provided years of enjoyment, although there could be little relaxation with the endless invasions of deer, rabbits, grey squirrels and moles. The never-ending war may have appealed to his military mind but the invaders, unfortunately, were less predictable than the Red forces of army map exercises and had nasty habits of outflanking his defences. Notably on one occasion a particularly bold rabbit broke right through and holed up in the downstairs loo.

Allan and Bumble loved racing and rarely missed days at Ascot, Cheltenham and Sandown. The atmosphere of excitement and the ever-widening circle of friends they met there were the attractions as much as

the racing itself. Allan had never excelled as a sportsman but he was immensely proud of his sons achievements and could be seen occasionally as a hopeful cricket umpire.

Everyone received a wonderful welcome at Upmeadow Lodge – even the local policeman, responding yet again to the burglar alarm tripped by unwary guests; it helped that the policeman’s brother was serving in the Regiment at the time. Hospitality was generous and frequent with much fun and a lot of laughter. This had always been the case wherever Allan and Bumble happened to be, although no party bettered the fabulous one with which they celebrated their Golden Wedding.

2/Lt Findlay joined the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards (the Skins) in 1949 in Paderborn, West Germany, as the result of a chance conversation with Gavin Murray a serving Skin. This, Allan always said, was his luckiest break. He settled easily into the Regiment, then equipped with Cromwell tanks. He was popular and able, a good communicator and listener with a dry sense of humour, whose obvious friendliness, kindness and consideration for others ensured that he got on with everybody no matter what rank they held.

His education at Wellington and Sandhurst had taught him the importance of attention to detail and the value of doing things properly and well. He liked to be precise and in order. Good manners and correct dress were traits that remained with him throughout his career. As Adjutant in Catterick in the 1950s his dress instructions to joining subalterns were refreshingly succinct – “White and black ties are required; uniform will be needed occasionally!” Rarely did he ever appear dishevelled, although one such occasion did occur with A Squadron in Libya in 1963. Allan had insisted on pitching his tent in a dried up wadi, away from the subalterns. A sudden and violent storm in the night swept down the wadi and at dawn next morning a very wet Squadron Leader sat shivering chrysalis-like, waiting for the sun to rise and dry him out.

1949 was an exceptional year for red Burgundy, which Allan will have known. It was also an exceptional vintage year for Skins subalterns. Amongst a noisy, energetic, amusing group of young officers at Paderborn a committed quintet of Allan, Anthony Millen, David Rowat, Mike Swindells and Charles Taylor stood out. Very good friends, they earned the title - the Gang of Five - and were all destined to become Commanding Officers at the same time of 5 different regiments.

Post war Germany was pretty austere and much was in short supply but there was no shortage of initiative or enterprise amongst Skins subalterns. When Allan and two fellow troop leaders' request for transport was turned down because military wheeled vehicles were embargoed to save petrol, the trio simply undertook their journey through the centre of Paderborn and Bad Lippe Springs in one of their Cromwell tanks on which there was no restriction, consuming vast quantities of fuel each way. The two other, erstwhile, joy riders are sitting in this congregation.

Wounded in Korea and evacuated back home with flash burns around his eyes, Allan was sent to recover in Nottingham as ADC to General Perry Harding, a hard taskmaster, who did not suffer fools. Allan was certainly not that but he did learn much from the experience. Rejoining the Regiment at Catterick he was made Adjutant and also became Master of the Catterick Beagles, both of which he much enjoyed. He also paid his first visit to Enniskillen as Equerry to the Colonel-in-Chief, King Leopold of the Belgians, when the Regiment received the Freedom of the town. A friendship developed, which Allan, 30 years later, used to persuade the King to come to the Regiment in Osnabruck, Germany – his first official visit since 1937.

But if beagling at Catterick was a fun, new interest, Allan also had a fun, new passion.

Allan married Bumble Orlebar at St Michael's Chester Square in April 1956. Devoted to each other for 53 years Allan and Bumble's marriage had one singularly successful ingredient – a shared joy of people. Always interested in meeting people, hearing their views and enjoying their company, to each had been given also the wonderful gift of making the person spoken to feel that he or she was the only person Allan or Bumble wished to speak to. You always felt better having talked with either of them. This applied as much to their generation as to Giles and Ollie's friends and was especially true of all ranks that they came into contact within the Army.

Their gift of friendship is what unites us all here today.

Bumble's good humour never faltered as house move followed house move and their circle of friends grew ever wider. Their enthusiasm for all

things regimental was constant and their presence at any party ensured its success. Later Allan, showing great fortitude brushed aside concerns about his health, determined to carry on as normal, whilst Bumble treated a leg in plaster as the mildest of inconveniences. No wonder that everyone was always so thrilled to see them.

Allan's mildness of manner, tolerance and relaxed approach could be disarming and actually masked a powerful will and determination, both of which appeared if the line was overstepped. Three subalterns with him on a recruiting tour in N Ireland discovered this to their cost, when they were firmly 'gated' for failing to make an important meeting in Belfast on time. Their distress at being forbidden a prearranged day at Dublin Horse Show was made more acute by the displeasure of three girl friends, who were waiting there, expecting to be escorted to the Dublin ball later in the evening. But Allan bore no grudges and his favour was soon regained.

Allan was one of those leaders able to endear himself to all ranks by remembering not only their names but also their personal circumstances and who gave unstinting support and loyalty to his subordinates because they mattered to him. Nowhere was this more sorely tested than during the three months that he commanded C Squadron on detachment to guard RAF El Adem in the Libyan desert. A clash of cultures is a mild description of what went on between khaki and light blue and Allan became a frequent visitor to the office of the Group Captain commanding, whom he irreverently referred to as the Station Master behind his back, for morning interviews without coffee. His forbearance in the face of continual misdemeanours by his Troop Leaders was commendable as was his tolerant agreement to a farewell party for the RAF on the night before the Squadron left. Such a lethal concoction, challengingly called Rocket Fuel, was served that few of the guests survived the duration of the party and all flying was probably cancelled for the rest of the week. Allan did not stop to find out, as he led his Squadron onto the charter flight early next morning and legged it back to England.

The next overseas posting involved less sand and much more fun. Allan's tour of duty as Personal Staff Officer to C-in-C Far East, Admiral Hill Norton was appreciably jollier. Amongst his many duties was a requirement to arrange all the Admirals visits and trips around a parish that encompassed the eastern half of the globe. With his 40th birthday approaching Allan decided to give himself a present. He worked out that by juggling the Admiral's visit programme and by clever use of the

international date line, he would be able to celebrate his birthday twice. On the day in question, however, to his chagrin the aircraft was grounded and the plan came to naught.

Meanwhile the Military Secretary had ended his lengthy considerations on the futures of the Gang of Five and Allan found himself appointed to command The Queen's Own Yeomanry with its HQ in Northumberland. This was undoubtedly a feather in Allan's cap but tempered by the fact that the regiment existed only on paper. In 1971 he found himself, therefore, accompanied by an Adjutant and a Chief Clerk, the latter carrying a large typewriter, standing in a Territorial Army Drill Hall in South Shields with a written instruction in his hand to form an armoured reconnaissance regiment with an operational role to reinforce 1st British Corps in Germany. If ever resourcefulness and *sang froid* were called for this was it. Fortunately for Allan his good friend, David Rowat, had just experienced a similar venture with the Royal Yeomanry so that there was some experience to draw upon. With 4 squadrons in Ayshire, Cheshire, Yorkshire and Northumberland Allan spent many hours on the road during the 2 ½ years he commanded before the task was successfully accomplished. To quote his Yeoman second in command "Nobody else could have done it. Certainly no volunteer. Allan was especially good at bringing people together; good at listening and letting people have their say; and very supportive of his subordinates."

Required to report progress on the formation of the regiment to the Director Royal Armoured Corps annual conference late one afternoon, Allan, to the surprise of the senior officers present, stepped aside and introduced LCpl Nott a dustman from North Shields, who proceeded to describe in down-to-earth Geordie what the volunteers thought about it. That few of the southerners there could understand a word of what LCpl Nott was saying mattered not one jot, as Allan had succeeded in gaining their attention and promoting his Regiment in a typically amusing way.

Allan always maintained that the volunteer's enthusiasm and willingness made his life easy and the only real problem he ever faced at this time was over the selection of the regiment's new cap badge. After most of the first regimental training day had been taken up with discussion of this subject rather than the tactical problem set, and Allan had let everyone have his say, he pronounced that as their role involved running reconnaissance and two of the squadron leaders were Masters of Hounds, the cap badge should be a running fox. And so it is.

In 1973 to the delight of both of his regiments Allan was awarded a well earned OBE. At the same time promotion accompanied a move to Dorset before further promotion to Brigadier took him to the Ministry of Defence as Director of Sales.

After two years as the Brigadier, Deputy District Commander for the north west of England in Preston, Allan retired from the Army in 1982 just 2 days before Ollie was commissioned into the Skins from Sandhurst. Allan claimed that the Army had room for only one Findlay and it was now Ollie's turn.

But as his career on the active list was drawing to an end, he had been appointed honorary Colonel of the Regiment he had joined 32 years earlier. His enthusiasm for all things regimental, sound advice and enormous experience were greatly valued by successive commanding officers throughout the 5 years of his Colonelcy, during which the Skins undertook a successful operational tour in Co Fermanagh and soon afterwards celebrated its 300th birthday. Allan would drop everything to assist when needed, willingly grasping nettles when required and both he and Bumble were always at hand with comfort and support when things went wrong.

The Skins, and its successor The Royal Dragoon Guards, have Allan to thank for achieving the appointment of Prince Charles as Colonel-in-Chief of the Regiment. This was not easily done and was only accomplished after long and delicate negotiations with Brussels, Clarence House and the Ministry of Defence.

As one of his oldest friends remarked recently of Allan “ he would also have made an excellent diplomat.”

The valediction in the Regimental Journal at the end of his Colonelcy sums up his Regiment's feelings:-

‘ Without Colonel Allan's energetic lead, diplomacy and – on several occasions- patience, any of the major events could have failed. None did. But if the Colonel has an obvious flair for the special occasion, both he and Mrs Findlay had exactly the right touch for the many informal visits to the Regiment. What popular events these visits were, everyone particularly enjoying the opportunities to meet and talk to them both. The Regiment is not only extremely grateful but also highly appreciative of all the time, trouble and effort the Colonel of the Regiment took on our behalf during 5 very important years.”

That so many people are here today, many having travelled considerable distances, is testament to the affection that Allan and Bumble have engendered in a huge circle of friends. Allan's kindness and thought for others, his sense of humour and ready wit, his steadfast friendship and the fun he brought to everything he did will be much missed.

His fortitude after his stroke and his determination to live normally gained the admiration of all who met him. His love for both his Regiments and his unstinting commitment to them earned profound respect and gratitude.

He was devoted to his family and grandchildren and loved this beautiful corner of Sussex. His greatest sorrow came with the early death of Giles. His greatest triumph was the courage and dignity in facing this disaster.

Allan, thank you for friendship, advice, good humour, patience and lots of fun.

Bumble, Ollie and Caroline, Alexandra, Edward and Max our collective and enduring love and support.