



Ritchie in 1964 while on operational duty as a forward air controller during the Radfan campaign

OBITUARY

Brigadier Charles Ritchie obituary

Seemingly indestructible army officer who survived sharks, the IRA, cyanide, the Stasi and even a duel with shotguns

Wednesday February 10 2021, 12.01am GMT, The Times

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Charles Ritchie's military career almost ended before it began when he challenged a fellow cadet at Sandhurst to a duel with shotguns. The cause of the Scotsman's ire was a friend's legerdemain in depriving him of an attractive woman's company at a party.

The cadets' agreement had been for the friend to collect two female guests before picking up Ritchie at his billet and going on to the party together, but when the friend's date cancelled he told the other girl that Ritchie had become indisposed and took her to the party himself. Having waited, pacing up and down for several hours, dressed and primed for action, Ritchie's solitary pre-party drinks session turned sour and he went to bed.

Roused at 2am by the raucous return of his friend, who hesitantly gave a full confession of his conduct, Ritchie, said:

“You contemptible bastard, I am challenging you to a duel! Firearms, at dawn, with seconds in attendance.” The appointment was postponed until after lunch and it was decided that each party would take alternate shots, starting at a distance of 75 yards, advancing one yard after each shot, until blood was drawn. Tweed caps and bowed heads would offer some protection to the eyes. In the event the pair walked, shooting at each other in turn with pellets stinging their bare arms until at about 50 yards his opponent charged, yelling a war cry and shooting from the hip, drawing blood from Ritchie’s arm. The friend claimed victory but Ritchie was not satisfied, ambushing him and firing over his head as they returned to the lines. A company sergeant-major predicted their ejection from Sandhurst but the duel resulted only in a dressing down and a lasting reputation for being a swashbuckler.

The escapade characterised the luck and derring-do of an incident-prone life during which Ritchie survived encounters with sharks, tribesmen, the IRA and even his own men, as well as arrest by the Russians for espionage. It also showed the passion for drama of a frustrated actor who would go on to mobilise his extrovert’s charm to defuse tensions in hostile environments ranging from Libya to the Edinburgh Military Tattoo. Living according to his motto that “laughter is the best weapon”, the title of his posthumously published memoir, he was a fine raconteur in the military mould.

Soon after passing out from Sandhurst Ritchie had two scrapes with death in the mid-1960s while serving with the Royal Scots in the Radfan campaign in South Yemen. One afternoon he was sitting on a radio battery out in the open while taking an early supper when he came under sniper fire. He collapsed to the floor, thinking that he had been hit. After the firing stopped he realised that he had not been wounded but the battery had taken a direct round.

He had another brush with death while clearing an empty house of bugs so that it could be used for shelter for his mortar section. He ordered a young soldier to “flash-burn” it — meaning laying a trickle of petrol inside its walls and lighting it — but the subordinate poured a 20-litre jerrycan over the floor and

dropped a lit match through a window as Ritchie entered to inspect it. The explosion blew him back 30 yards into a cattle ring.

Badly burnt and apparently lifeless, he was given the last rites by a padre as he was lifted into a helicopter. A letter of condolence was sent to his parents in Scotland. Medics then realised that an overdose of morphia had sent him into a coma. He was discharged from hospital a few weeks later without any obvious signs of lasting damage.

Charles David Maciver Ritchie, the elder son of Lieutenant-Colonel Bill Ritchie of the Royal Scots, was born into a military family at Inverness in 1941. At Wellington College he wanted to be an actor but a friend persuaded him to join the army.

In 1962 Ritchie was posted to the 1st Battalion in Libya, where he gallantly survived poisoning from a bunch of grapes which local Italian farmers had sprayed with hydrogen cyanide as a pesticide. Not long afterwards he emerged without significant harm from a helicopter crash on Salisbury Plain and shot a wolf with which he came face-to-face at the entrance to his tent during winter warfare training in Arctic Canada. He also swam unperturbed among venomous sea-snakes and saltwater crocodiles off the coast of East Timor and fought off a shark in the waters of Belize.



Ritchie as colonel of the Royal Scots

His memoir modestly glossed over the achievements of a distinguished army career. He was appointed Operations Officer with the British commanders-in-chief mission to the Soviet Forces in Germany in 1978. Suited to the game of “gentleman spying”, his many cat-and-mouse escapades with the East German Stasi ended when, having spent all night in a ditch to photograph previously unseen Russian military equipment, he was captured by members of the Spetznatz (Russian special forces) while making his escape. He was formally expelled from East Germany and appointed an MBE. He was later advanced to CBE.

While an instructor at the Joint Services Staff College at Greenwich in 1984 he married Araminta Luard, who with their son, Paul, survives him. Araminta would in time become a veteran of his bardic tale-telling.

In the 1980s he commanded 3rd Battalion The Ulster Defence Regiment in Northern Ireland and was promoted to brigadier in 1988 at a time when his regiment was subject to increasing terrorist attacks off duty and claims of misconduct on duty.

The remainder of his army career was marked by a series of senior appointments, including national military representative at Shape, the Nato command centre in Belgium, and chief of staff to the UN Protection Force in the former Yugoslavia during one of the most bitter periods of the conflict.

Towards the end of his soldiering life he was appointed colonel of the Royal Scots and an aide-de-camp to the Queen. His final military job, military attaché in Paris, coincided with the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and he broke protocol by draping her coffin with the Royal Standard, not the Union Flag. He went with his heart, he said, not his head.

After his retirement in 1998 he worked briefly for a Canadian soya company, but it was in roles such as a director of the Edinburgh (now Royal) Military Tattoo and as a member of the Countryside Alliance that his enthusiastic nature shone. His sense of duty and generous spirit won him many admirers throughout his life — even among his enemies. Before his Russian captors had ejected him from East Germany, they held a farewell party out of respect for “the mad Scotsman”.

**Brigadier Charles Ritchie, CBE, was born on December 12, 1941.
He died after a short illness on December 16, 2020, aged 79**

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