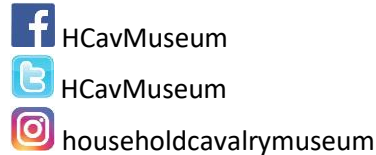




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HOUSEHOLD CAVALRY MUSEUM COLLECTION

No: 7

MOUNTBATTEN'S CLOAK

Hello, and welcome back to the Household Cavalry Museum's video podcasts. In last week's video I told you about Major General Sir Stewart Menzies and his 2nd Life Guards wedding present.

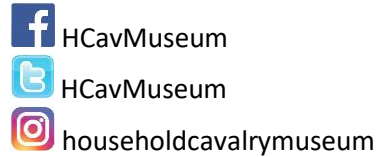
This week, I'm staying with The Life Guards and another notable wartime leader. He was Admiral of the Fleet Earl Mountbatten of Burma who, from 1965 until his murder in 1979, was Colonel of the regiment and Gold Stick. The starting point for this talk is an item of Mountbatten's uniform that is now on display in the Reserve Collection in Windsor. It is an officer's Full Dress Cloak.

At first, it looks no different to any other Life Guard officer's cloak – until, that is, you look at the epaulettes. For there, below the crown and two stars denoting a Colonel are not one but three royal cyphers denoting that the wearer was the Personal Aide de camp to three British sovereigns. In Mountbatten's case, King Edward VIII, King George VI and the present Queen.



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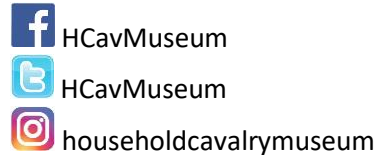
Colonel Dickie, as he was known to The Life Guards, was not above vanity and always claimed that he was the only man ever to have had this distinctive grouping of royal cyphers. I have trawled various sources and I now believe that, as with so many of his other claims, he was right. Whilst my search to verify Colonel Dickie's claim was not driven by malice – quite the reverse in fact – it is a sad fact that sooner or later, every public figure of any note is subjected to hostile scrutiny: 2020, it seems, has been the year to trash Mountbatten's reputation. It started with a tendentious and, in parts, defamatory biography. This was followed by a maliciously scripted Channel 5 programme, in which the hostile commentary was strangely at odds with the interviewee's less censorious views. And the year is ending with the new series of *The Crown*, which casts all the members of the Royal Family, except Princess Diana, as villains.

Colonel Dickie, who was born a Serene Highness and was a great-grandson of Queen Victoria, is currently being attacked on a number of fronts. These include his ambition, his marriage, the loss of HMS *Kelly*, the failure of the Dieppe Raid, Indian Partition, his possible involvement in a proposed *coup d'état* and his private life. So, what is the truth?



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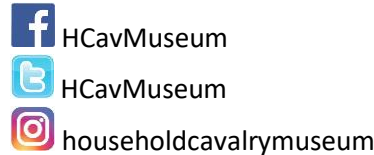
Let me start by accepting that Mountbatten was ruthlessly ambitious, self-promoting and vain. I experienced at first-hand his determination to advertise his royal connections on every possible occasion. At least once a year, Mountbatten would visit The Life Guards. Every such visit would include an address to the regiment. These talks would – as in this photo taken in Burma in 1944 - start with Colonel Dickie's trademark: 'break ranks and gather round', whilst a carefully pre-positioned crate was moved into position to elevate Colonel Dickie above the surrounding troops. This would quickly be followed by a throwaway remark that left no one in any doubt as to his proximity to the throne. 'As I was saying to your Colonel-in-Chief last week on *Britannia...*' is the opening gambit that I remember best, but it was neither unique nor unusual. But such self-aggrandisement did not make Mountbatten either a hero or a villain. It was, rather, a foible that endeared him to his men.

What then to make of his marriage in 1922 to Edwina Ashley, granddaughter of the fabulously rich Jewish financier, Sir Ernest Cassel? I have no doubt that, amongst other reasons, Mountbatten married Edwina for her money, but – equally – she married him for his title and royal connections. It was, in fact, an arrangement that suited both



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his career and her social ambitions. That their marriage quickly became an open one, attests to Mountbatten's honesty not to a mendacious nature – and the fact that Edwina Mountbatten was half-Jewish, and her fortune completely so, shows that Mountbatten was no anti-semite at a time when anti-Semitism in London society was rife.

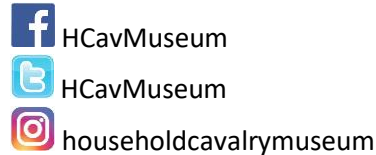
I'm going to turn now to the loss of HMS *Kelly* in 1941 which was a misfortune, and probably due to Mountbatten's impetuosity, but was not deliberate. Had it been so, or if there had been any suspicions of that nature, there is no way that he would have been awarded a DSO. Nor, perhaps more tellingly, would either Winston Churchill or the Admiralty have sanctioned the making of Noel Coward's 1942 morale-boosting propaganda film, *In Which We Serve*, which was based on the story of HMS *Kelly* and whose Captain was modelled on Mountbatten.

It is now fashionable to blame Mountbatten, as Chief of Combined Operations, for the failure of Operation Jubilee (the 1942 Dieppe raid), while conveniently overlooking the successes of the Bruneval and St Nazaire Raids which preceded it. Whilst it is true that Dieppe was close to being a fiasco and the casualties were high, as Second



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World War cock-ups go it pales into insignificance when compared to Montgomery's Operation Market Garden in 1944. Today, 'Monty' largely escapes blame for the loss of the 13,000 men killed, wounded or captured in the fight for the bridges over the Rhine and the failure to hold Arnhem.

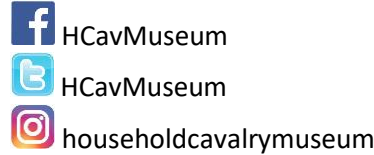
Mountbatten's critics then turn their fire on his role in Indian independence. But that, surely, is a matter of perspective: in the world's largest democracy, India, he is still revered; but in dysfunctional Pakistan he is reviled. Those facts speak louder than Mountbatten's detractors. Where Partition is concerned, Mountbatten, who was in any event acting upon the orders of Attlee's Labour government, would have been damned whatever he did. Without in any way trying to belittle the appalling cost in human lives of Partition, by seeking to achieve it quickly, Mountbatten may have been responsible for less inter-racial bloodshed than might have been the case. We will never know.

There is then the vexed question of the extent to which he was involved in 1968 in Cecil King's pathetic and putative *coup d'etat*. I know no more than anyone else, but I suspect that Colonel Dickie was willing to listen to King's proposals – who wouldn't have been at that



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troubled time – but quickly rejected the role envisaged for him as treason. My own small, and utterly futile, attempt to destabilise Harold Wilson’s government in 1974 earned me this advice from Colonel Dickie: ‘you can’t fart against thunder, Christopher.’ Was this based on his own experience?

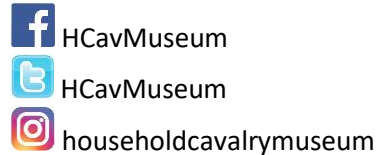
Finally, there is the question of his private life. Whatever the truth of the matter, two things are clear on that subject: Mountbatten hurt no one, and whatever his antics in the bedroom they were no worse than those of other senior political, military and royal personages of the past 150 years – and he never gave an interview in which he discussed them.

So, if the allegation that Mountbatten was a villain is, at the very worst, unproven, is there a case to be made for him as a hero? I will just leave the facts to speak for themselves. Colonel Dickie first saw ‘in action’ during the First World War aged 16; he was a Captain RN at the aged 37, Chief of Combined Operations aged 41 and Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia aged 43. He was the Last Viceroy & first Governor General of India aged 47, First Sea Lord aged 55, Chief of the Defence Staff aged 59, Colonel of The Life Guards aged 65, Governor of the Isle of Wight aged 65, President of United World



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Colleges aged 67, Lord Lieutenant of the Isle of Wight aged 74, he was Assassinated by the Provisional IRA aged 79 and given a full military funeral. He was also a Knight of the Order of the Garter, a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, a member of the Order of Merit, a Knight Grand Commander of the Order of the Star of India and the Order of the Indian Empire, a Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for gallantry, he was a Privy Counsellor, a Fellow of the Royal Society and – as his cloak in the museum attests – Personal ADC to three British sovereigns. Not a bad record of achievement for any man.

I hope that, in the last few minutes, I have been able to undo some of the damage done to Colonel Dickie's reputation this year. Next week, I am going to be looking at an object given to The Royals by one of their Colonels, who probably deserves most of the mud that has been slung at him in the past hundred years. In the meantime, stay well and stay safe...