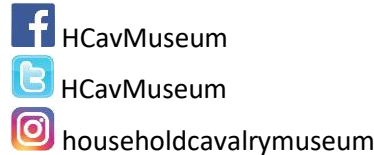




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## HOUSEHOLD CAVALRY ANECDOTES~NO 20

### SWORDS & PENS

In this video, the last in this series of Household Cavalry Anecdotes, I am going to look at three Royal Horse Guards officers: Major General Sir Robert Laycock, Evelyn Waugh and his son Auberon.

The Roll Call of Household Cavalrymen who have served, and continue to serve, in Britain's Special Forces is a long one, headed by **Major General Sir Robert 'Bob' Laycock** who is widely regarded as the 'father of Special Forces'. Laycock, a well-connected old Etonian from a military family, was commissioned from the Royal Military College Sandhurst into the Royal Horse Guards (The Blues) in 1927. His pre-war service was unremarkable – other than his rather un-Household Cavalry interest in matters scientific – and gave no hint of what was to come.

At the outset of the Second World War, and as a result of his interest in chemicals, Laycock was the GSO2 (Chemical Warfare) on the Staff of the British Expeditionary Force in France. Recalled for a Staff Course, Laycock missed the Battle of France following which he might well have been re-deployed as an expert on chemical warfare, had he not volunteered for the fledgling Commandos.

At the time, this was a specialist force being assembled by Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, the first Director of Combined Operations, to carry out raids on the coastline of Occupied Europe – as opposed to the raids behind enemy lines to be carried out by the Special Operations Executive.

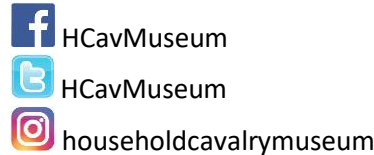
Accepted into the Commandos by Keyes and promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, Laycock was made responsible for assembling and training Z Force, which came to be known as 'Layforce'. This was an enlarged Battalion of five Commandos which, in 1941, set sail for the Middle East. After a number of minor raids with mixed results, Layforce was tasked with acting as the rear-guard in the British fighting withdrawal from Crete in May to June of that year.

Throughout this time, Laycock's PA was the novelist **Captain Evelyn Waugh** (later of The Blues – and about whom there will be more in a moment). It is popularly believed that in his novel trilogy, *Sword of Honour*, which covers the actions in Crete, Waugh based his eccentric



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character, Brigadier Ben Ritchie-Hook, on the one-armed, one-eyed Lieutenant General Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart VC who Waugh knew of through his father.

However, Waugh usually based his main characters on people he knew well: for example, the Flytes in *Brideshead Revisited* are the Beauchamp family and Charles Ryder is the author. So, it is far more likely that Ritchie-Hook is Laycock, albeit combined with some of the physical characteristics of de Wiart.

The disaster of Crete was swiftly followed for Laycock by an equally disastrous Commando raid on General Irwin Rommel's HQ in Libya, in the wake of which Laycock had to flee into the Libyan desert where he existed for two months behind enemy lines. He would later say that he owed his survival to a knowledge of the habits of foxes: in gratitude, Laycock never again went fox hunting.

Safely back in Cairo by the start of 1942, he was recalled to England, promoted to Brigadier and tasked with establishing the Special Service Brigade which, in co-operation with Commodore Lord Louis Mountbatten, later Colonel of The Life Guards, who had replaced Keyes at Combined Operations, was focussed on planning and executing raids on the coast of continental Europe.

Once the Germans had been pushed out of North Africa, in August 1943 Laycock and his Commandos were tasked with capturing key bridges in Sicily in support of the Allied landings on the island. For these successful operations, he was awarded a DSO. A month later, Laycock and his Commandos were once again to play a key role, this time during the landings on the Italian mainland at Salerno when, despite the loss of half his force, Laycock's men captured and held the town for eleven days in the face of fierce German counter-attacks.

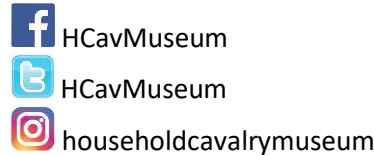
In October 1943, Laycock was withdrawn from Italy, promoted to Major General and appointed Mountbatten's successor as Director of Combined Operations, where his primary task was to prepare for D-Day. Laycock remained the Director of Combined Operations for the rest of the war until he resigned to fight the 1945 General Election as a Conservative. He lost and returned to Combined Operations for two more years until it was disbanded and he retired.

This was not, however, the end of Laycock's public service for, in 1954, he was appointed Governor & Commander-in-Chief of Malta, a difficult job in the face of a crescendo of nationalist Maltese calls for independence. So successful was Laycock's tenure of the Maltese hot-seat that his term was twice extended before he finally retired to focus on his property, his horses, yachting, collecting books and barbering.



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And what of the aforementioned **Captain Evelyn Waugh**, the satirical novelist who initially applied to join first the Irish then the Welsh Guards but was rejected by both, possibly because of the footwear he wore to his interviews? The famously broadminded Welsh Guards Colonel, Chicot Leatham, described him as ‘a shit in suede shoes’. Failing the Foot Guards, Waugh was commissioned into the Commandos but, in 1942, transferred to The Blues. Whilst on sick leave from the Regiment in 1944 he wrote his most celebrated and semi-autobiographical novel, *Brideshead Revisited*.

Although not as famous as his father, **Cornet Auberon Waugh** – known by all as ‘Bron’ – followed him into the Royal Horse Guards for National Service. During a tour of duty in Cyprus with the Regiment in 1958, which his father contemptuously described as ‘going to Cyprus to be stoned by schoolgirls’, he was badly injured when trying to clear the machine gun on his armoured car. In defiance of any training he had received on the subject of clearing jammed guns, Bron seized the machinegun by the muzzle and shook it – until it fired six rounds through him, resulting in the loss of a finger, one lung, several ribs and his spleen.

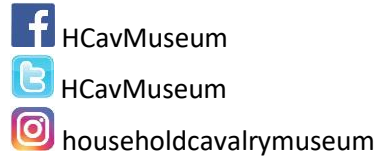
After months in hospital, during which he nearly died, Bron was medically discharged; he never fully recovered. Despite his injury, Bron went on to make a successful career as a journalist, became famous for his column in *Private Eye* and led campaigns in favour of smoking and drinking and, somewhat eccentrically, against the consumption of hamburgers. Bron died at the early age of 61 in 2001, primarily as the result of his wounds and his smoking.

I hope you have enjoyed this last Household Cavalry Anecdotes video. I am now taking a break for what remains of the summer and will return in the autumn with a new video series looking at some of the items in the collection of the Household Cavalry Museum – from the magnificent Zetland Trophy to Lord Anglesey’s wooden leg.



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**‘NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW THIS...’**

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