



# COMMANDO GENERAL

THE LIFE OF MAJOR GENERAL  
SIR ROBERT LAYCOCK

KCMG CB DSO

RICHARD MEAD

FOREWORD BY MAJOR GENERAL JULIAN THOMPSON CB OBE

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Richard Mead

Foreword by Major General  
Julian Thompson CB, OBE



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**MILITARY**

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## Foreword

Robert Laycock was the youngest British or Commonwealth officer to be promoted to the rank of major general in the Second World War, at the age of thirty-six. But as Richard Mead tells us, ‘Bob’, as he calls him, ‘never went on to higher command in the field or in grand strategy’, so he cannot be counted among the truly great soldiers of the Second World War. Instead, Richard Mead believes, with good reason, that Laycock deserves to be remembered for his key role in the evolution of the Commandos from their tentative beginnings into the elite formation they are today. He was one of the first Commandos, and it is to his credit that the inheritors of the concept launched in June 1940, are the Royal Marines. This was made clear to me, a young subaltern in 40 Commando Royal Marines in Malta in 1957, when the Governor, Major General Sir Robert Laycock, visited us. Our commanding officer, and many of the majors and captains had served in commandos in the Second World War, which had ended a mere twelve years before. They all held ‘Lucky’ Laycock in high esteem. As none of us was insubordinate enough to address him thus, we did not know that he disliked the nickname for its insinuation that he owed his position to luck rather than merit. One could argue that in many cases luck in the form of opportunity recognized and seized is one of the attributes of a good commander, and in that sense Laycock was both lucky and a good commander. The notice asking for volunteers to join the Commandos coming out just before he was due to leave Britain for a posting in Egypt; his escape and evasion after the abortive ‘Rommel Raid’; and his appointment to succeed Mountbatten as Chief of Combined Operations are just three examples of how the wings of Laycock’s luck beat over his head on numerous occasions.

He was most certainly *not* lucky to be sent to command the commandos of Layforce in the Middle East; although only the gift of foresight could have told him that. That they were misused was not his fault; anymore than the debacle in Crete, in which Layforce was involved at the very end, was his fault. Given a choice, and again equipped with a crystal ball, he would probably have opted for command of one of the four Special Service (Commando) brigades in the more fulfilling period of late 1943 onwards. But other than a very successful twelve days commanding the Special Service Brigade in Sicily and Italy in mid-1943, this was not to be. His appointment as CCO put paid to that. But the beneficiaries of the decision to make him CCO were the commandos, and

especially the Royal Marines. The frustrating time experienced by the Royal Marines during the first half of the Second World War is given due coverage by Richard Mead. The Admiralty were the architects of the muddle and frustration and to some extent a few senior Royal Marines were as well. Mountbatten and Laycock saved the Royal Marines from the oblivion that would have been their fate after the Second World War. In his foreword to the *Green Beret: The Story of the Commandos*, Mountbatten refers to Laycock as ‘one of the original Commando soldiers – and in my opinion perhaps the greatest of them all’. That accolade, written in 1949, surely refers not just to Laycock’s achievements in action, but even more so to his work as CCO from mid-October 1943 to June 1947. It is fitting that it does so.

Several well known personalities appear in the book, among them Evelyn Waugh whom Laycock allowed to serve in the Special Service Brigade, in the role of court jester, long after he had overstayed his welcome. Several officers who served with him have expressed the view that although personally brave, Waugh was the type of officer who should never be allowed near troops.

*Commando General* is a balanced and perceptive biography of a soldier whose work endures to this day. It is also a window on a world that has all but disappeared, and the glimpses we are given are entertaining and revealing. The author is to be congratulated on a very enjoyable and informative work, which moves along apace.

Julian Thompson

## Introduction

In early June 1940 Great Britain was on the back foot. The British Expeditionary Force had been ejected from the continent of Europe and, although the majority of its men had been rescued, all its heavy weapons and transport had been abandoned at Dunkirk. France, the country's only ally outside the British Empire, was a broken reed and would shortly capitulate to the Germans. The prospect of invasion seemed all too likely and, unsurprisingly, the focus of the armed forces was exclusively on defence.

Winston Churchill, Prime Minister for just a month, was determined to find some way to take the battle to the enemy rather than simply wait to be attacked. The main obstacle was water. Germany was already in control of the coastline of Europe from North Cape to the Pas-de-Calais and would shortly extend its rule to the Spanish frontier. The chances of crossing the intervening seas in significant strength in the immediate future were minimal, but Churchill saw an opportunity for small-scale operations to show the enemy that he was not safe in Fortress Europe but could be attacked at any time. He demanded from his military leaders a force which could mount frequent raids on that long coastline.

Thus were born the direct ancestors of today's 3 Commando Brigade, an elite formation which has continued to prove itself since the Second World War, in Korea, at Suez, in the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan and a number of other smaller campaigns.

However, whilst a very small number of Royal Marines were recruited into the original Commandos in mid-1940, the new force was essentially an Army affair, and it was not until early in 1942 that the first RM Commando was formed. Amongst the officers selected to raise the Army Commandos was a thirty-three-year-old captain in the Royal Horse Guards, Robert Laycock. Just over three years later he would become the youngest general officer in the British Army and the Chief of Combined Operations, sitting at the head of the organization which, more than any other, made possible the landings which put the Western Allies back in strength onto the continent of Europe.

I have long been fascinated by Bob Laycock's wartime career. The eighteen months which followed his selection to raise 8 Commando were for the most part a story of disappointment, failure, even disaster. Yet in early 1942 he was appointed to the most senior position within the overall Commando force and, following a short period of active service in 1943, was the surprise choice to

follow Lord Louis Mountbatten at Combined Operations. I decided to look more closely at how this rapid elevation had been achieved.

I knew before I began that Bob had left behind some potentially very useful material, which was deposited in the Liddell Hart Archives at King's College, London. These papers turned out to be voluminous, containing mostly official and semi-official documents, but also many of a more personal nature. When I approached his surviving children, who were supportive from the outset, they told me that he never threw anything away, a trait which I, as a biographer, could only thoroughly commend!

It turned out that a lot of other important papers had been retained by the family. Bob only kept a proper diary during the early years of his military career, initially as a cadet at Sandhurst and then as a subaltern in the Royal Horse Guards; at first glance it is of rather more interest to a social historian than a military one, but on a closer look it is indicative of the level of professionalism, or lack of it, in the British Army in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The diary of his voyage in a four-masted barque around the Cape of Good Hope in 1932, whilst on extended leave from his regiment, is fascinating and throws a great deal of light on his character.

The most exciting find, however, was his draft memoirs. These were unearthed only shortly before I began to write, which in retrospect was a very good thing as I might otherwise have been tempted to skim on some of the research. It was known that he was working on them and, indeed, I had found fragments at King's College; but apparently he thought that they were rather dull and appears to have made no attempt to have them published. The memoirs are, in fact, far from dull. Bob wrote excellent prose, and his keen sense of humour makes them very entertaining. They cover his pre-War career relatively sketchily until he left his regiment in 1937, but thereafter are full of both information and opinion, adding depth to what I had already discovered and correcting a few misconceptions. Unfortunately, they come to an abrupt end in the autumn of 1941, so do not cover some important parts of Bob's military career, including his participation in the raid on what was believed to be General Rommel's headquarters in North Africa, his period of active service in Sicily and Italy and his term as Chief of Combined Operations. There are jottings for the missing years in the Liddell Hart Archives, but they take the form of cryptic aide-memoires, which are of little real value. What the memoirs do include of particular significance are his own accounts of his selection for the Commandos and of events on Crete.

The very brief period which Bob spent on Crete, an incident-packed five days in all, was the most controversial of his career. The controversy, however, did not see the light of day until half a century later, long after Bob had died. It emerged in Antony Beevor's book, *Crete – The Battle and the Resistance*, published in 1991. The issues were firstly, whether Bob disobeyed orders that Layforce should be

the last to be evacuated from the island, and secondly, whether he should have left himself, whilst the majority of his command remained to be taken prisoner. Beevor, whilst stating that there was no question of cowardice on Bob's part, was critical of his decisions; his view has been repeated in subsequent accounts and has arguably tarnished Bob's reputation.

Bob, however, has had at least one champion, in the person of Professor Donat Gallagher of James Cook University, who has consistently sought to justify his decisions and actions. The debate between Gallagher and Beevor, largely conducted through articles and letters in various learned journals, depends heavily on the timing of certain events and the interpretation of the interaction between Bob and his superiors. Whilst highly interesting to me, the arguments are likely to be very tedious to most of my readers. I have, accordingly, decided not to set out the two points of view but to make up my own mind on the subject based on the evidence available. I have had the advantage over the two eminent historians of reading Bob's memoirs, which give a detailed account of the battle and the circumstances of his evacuation. Whether these would have made any difference to Beevor or Gallagher, I cannot say. One might argue on the one hand that they are a primary source, but on the other that they were written many years later, when memory was inevitably less accurate, and that they were specifically designed to be a defence of the decisions taken at the time.

Whilst Bob's wartime career will be of most interest to readers and thus occupies the greater part of this book, it took up only ten per cent of his life. Inevitably, his family background and his education were important ingredients in making him the man he was. However, there are only a few clues as to how the carefree young subaltern of the late 1920s, seemingly more interested in field sports and social life than in his military duties, developed into the highly professional soldier of the 1940s. One of the most telling documents unearthed for me by the family was a notebook, the front part of which contained Bob's personal appointments diary for 1942, whilst the back, evidently transcribed from other sources in 1945 and then continued until three days before he died in 1968, listed every book he had read from 1928 onwards. It is clear that, at a time when the average cavalry subaltern would have probably confined his reading to *The Field* and *Tatler*, Bob was extraordinarily widely read. In 1928, the year after he joined the regiment from Sandhurst, the list included not only light fiction by John Buchan, 'Sapper' and R. S. Surtees, but much more serious works by Bertrand Russell, Sigmund Freud, André Maurois and Basil Liddell Hart. A similar mix continued until the War, during which the balance shifted markedly to the lighter end of the spectrum. The year 1940, for instance, was heavily dominated by P. G. Wodehouse, perhaps unsurprisingly given the background of current events. Although history and biography in particular subsequently reappeared in the reading list, Bob's taste thereafter, albeit very catholic, remained biased towards fiction.

Bob's family provided a rock-solid foundation to his life. The major source of information on his forebears was a slim volume published privately in 1936 by his aunt, Barbara Mitchell-Innes, which focused on his father, Joe, but went back some way into previous generations. By an incredible stroke of luck I managed to acquire for myself a copy of the privately printed log of the first major voyage of Joe's yacht, the *Valhalla*. Joe was the most important influence on Bob's early life, and I decided to cover him in some detail in the book, but it is clear from both Mitchell-Innes and Bob's diaries that his parents, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles and near cousins were always very close, seeing a great deal of each other both at the family home at Wiseton in Nottinghamshire and in London. Bob himself went on to have a very successful marriage to Angela Dudley Ward, and they and their children remained as close as had previous generations.

Bob's resignation from the Army in 1947 was probably caused, like many others', by a lack of jobs for senior officers in a rapidly contracting peacetime organization. He had just turned forty, with plenty of time to embark on a new and productive career, but he chose not to do so until he was suddenly invited to become Governor of Malta, an appointment which, after two extensions, lasted for nearly five years. These were difficult times for the island, but they are at least well chronicled both in the press and in various archives. Bob's own views can be found in some of his letters to Angie on the occasions when they were parted. His wartime letters to her are also of interest, but they suffer from the requirements of the censor that nothing of any military moment should be mentioned, so are largely confined to domestic matters.

Bob Laycock's main claim to fame remains his role in the creation and development of the Commandos. At the time of his appointment to 8 Commando, few had any real idea of how they were to be employed. As it turned out, they were largely misused during their first two years, a litany of failure only alleviated by a few modest successes, in many ways reflecting the story of the British Army as a whole. Nevertheless, much was achieved during this period, especially in the design of a rigorous training regime, not so different from that of the modern Commandos, and in the devising of techniques for amphibious landings whose implementation came to fruition in the last three years of the War. Bob was at the heart of these initiatives, as he was in the debates which led to a complete reorganization of the Commandos in late 1943 and their transformation from an exclusively raiding force to one which would thenceforward largely act in support of conventional troops. As the post-War Chief of Combined Operations, he was instrumental in the retention and composition of 3 Commando Brigade, which still exists today, albeit somewhat larger in size and enhanced in capability.

Bob always insisted that the word 'Commando' should apply to the unit and not to the individual soldier who served in it. I have decided to stick to

this practice, which was certainly the correct one at the time of which I write, although from the early days both the men themselves and the general public began to use the word interchangeably.

I hoped originally to be able to call the book *The First Commando General*. It became clear to me at an early stage, however, that there were two other contenders for the title, Charles Haydon, who led the Commandos as a brigadier and, as a senior officer at Combined Operations HQ, was subsequently promoted to general officer rank before Bob, and Robert Sturges, a major general already at the time of his appointment to command the Special Services Group. Bob himself would not have cared. He was immensely proud to have been in at the beginning and still there when peace was declared, as a general, but also as a Commando soldier.

## Prologue

**D**arkness enveloped the landing craft as it headed towards the shore. Standing close to the coxswain, the brigadier could see little and hear nothing over the sound of the engines. Suddenly, from behind the vessel, the sky was illuminated as dozens of naval guns fired simultaneously, and within less than a minute he could see responding flashes away on the starboard beam. For a few moments all remained quiet ahead, but then he heard the sharp crack of guns from the destroyer lying offshore and saw explosions as the shells struck their targets. He knew that his advanced detachment was about to hit the beach and that he was hard on their heels.

Not for the first time, the brigadier was about to land on an enemy-held shore but this time it was different, the return to the mainland of Europe after years of frustration and disappointment. Like all those around him he had learnt earlier that night about the Italian surrender, but unlike most of them he believed that the opposition would still be ferocious. Nevertheless, as the landing craft began its final run-in to the beach, he was confident that the plan was good, that morale was high and that the seemingly endless months of training had furnished the skills for the job ahead. The fighting would be hard, but the outcome was not in doubt.



## *Chapter 1*

### **Joe**

**B**y the early eighteenth century the Laycock family had been established in the West Riding of Yorkshire for many generations, their name supposedly deriving from that of a village near Keighley. More than one of their members acted as Agent to the Dukes of Devonshire at Bolton Abbey. In 1732 Joseph Laycock moved north to Winlaton, County Durham, to work as the manager of Crowley's Iron Works. His grandson, also Joseph, was born there in 1798 and, after serving an apprenticeship at Crowley's, entered business on his own account when the iron works closed, succeeding initially in obtaining a contract from the Royal Navy for the manufacture of chains and anchors. When the Newcastle & Carlisle Railway was founded in 1825, he bid for and obtained the contract to supply 500 goods wagons, which began to run on the railway when it was opened in 1834. He also bought land on which he believed railways would have to be built, as turned out to be the case. In due course he became Chairman of the Blyth & Tyne Railway and then, after its acquisition by the much larger North Eastern Railway, a director of the latter. In 1852, by which time he had become an extremely wealthy man, he acquired Low Gosforth House, near Newcastle, with an estate of 287 acres. A longstanding member of the Newcastle Corporation, he became the city's Mayor in 1858 and in the same year acquired the Seghill Colliery

Robert Laycock, Joseph's only child by his marriage to Barbara Nicholson, was born in 1833. After graduating from Trinity College, Cambridge, he was called to the Bar and practised for a time on the Northern Circuit, but by 1866 he was working for his father, in which capacity he was asked to arrange a visit to Seghill by a party of Austrian businessmen. They were accompanied by a young lady called Annie Allhusen, with whom he fell in love and subsequently married. Her father, Christian Allhusen, was a remarkable man, who had been born in Kiel, at that time in Denmark, in 1805. With Europe in deep depression after the Napoleonic Wars he was sent by his family to live and work in Newcastle, in the first instance as an apprentice grain merchant. In due course he found an opportunity to trade on his own account, before moving on to the manufacture of caustic soda, which earned him a considerable fortune, some of which was spent in the purchase of Elswick Hall, a large estate not far from Low Gosforth. Allhusen became a British citizen in 1835 through a Private Act of Parliament.

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By the time of the wedding Robert was not getting on at all well with his father, who was evidently a difficult man, 'a bully to his workmen and a tyrant to those dependent on him'.<sup>1</sup> Joseph told his son that on his marriage he would buy him an estate, but it would have to be at least 100 miles away from Gosforth, the only condition being that he would have his grandchildren back at Low Gosforth for their holidays. The selected property was Wiseton Hall, a substantial country house in North Nottinghamshire, which had been originally built in 1771 and was much enlarged subsequently. It had earlier been the home of the Acklom family, whose heiress had married Earl Spencer, a leader of the campaign to pass the Reform Bill in 1832. Having bought the house and furnished it as cheaply as possible, Joseph declared that no further money would be forthcoming to the newlyweds, who would have to live on the income of the Home Farm of some 400 acres. All hopes of a brilliant social life disappeared, and Robert turned to politics, but failed to be elected as one of the two Members of Parliament for North Nottinghamshire in 1868 and for Nottingham in 1874.

Robert and Annie produced a family very quickly, Joseph Frederick, known to all as Joe, being born in 1867 and Barbara in 1868. Whilst their parents remained disappointed with their lot, the youngsters had a happy childhood, relying on their own wits and the company of the village children. Joe in particular was highly inventive with respect to games and, as he grew up, became fascinated by machinery, on one occasion appropriating a steam plough whilst the farm workers were at lunch, and driving it into a ditch. He was in due course sent off to prep school at Temple Grove, in East Sheen, before going on to Eton. Holidays were duly spent at Low Gosforth, where Joe's grandfather kept a pony for him to ride, and at a family house in Tynemouth.

Tensions continued at Wiseton, with debts mounting up due to Robert's extravagance and Annie's inability to economize. Annie very nearly ran away, stopped from doing so only because she could not bear to leave her daughter. Shortly afterwards Robert was asked to stand again for Parliament in the 1880 general election, but this time for North Lincolnshire. Like his father he was a committed Liberal, but North Lincolnshire had two sitting Conservative members, although one of the seats had been held by a Liberal member from 1857 to 1874. Initially Robert refused to let his name go forward for a third time, but he was persuaded to do so by Annie, who felt that it would give him a goal and, if he was successful, an occupation, and might very well change their fortunes. He lodged his nomination at Brigg Town Hall with minutes to spare, disappointing the two Conservative candidates, who were expecting a walkover.

Robert fought a strong campaign, denouncing the policies of Disraeli and advocating reform, particularly of the land laws. The election resulted in a Liberal landslide nationally, and in North Lincolnshire Robert received the largest number of votes in the constituency, to the dismay of one of the Conservative candidates. Robert was delighted and Annie was ecstatic. Even

his father was pleased, reimbursing Robert for the costs of his campaign. The only mild disappointment was that the house which Robert and Annie took in Mayfair, in order for him to be able to undertake his duties at Westminster, had to be shared with his parents.

A year later disaster struck. First of all, Joseph died. Nine days later Robert was suddenly taken ill in Eastbourne and died in a hotel there. Annie was left alone with two relatively young children, but for the first time in her marriage she had no financial worries, although the estate was to go substantially to Joe once he had attained his majority. At the time he was still at Eton, where he was socially successful but academically hopeless. Annie was keen that he should go on to Oxford, but neither Eton nor two successive crammers could produce the required results. Annie then suggested that he should join the Royal Horse Guards, but Joe persuaded her that the Yeomanry would be much more appropriate, since it would leave him time to look after the estate, which still included significant holdings of land and industrial businesses in the North East.

In 1887 Annie remarried, this time to Lord D'Arcy Osborne,<sup>2</sup> who, unlike some of her suitors, was approved of by her children. Joe attained his majority in the following year, upon which he assumed full control of his fortune from his trustees and set up his household at Wiseton Hall, with Barbara acting as his hostess. They were keen entertainers and devoted both to field sports, taking a house for the season in Bicester Hunt country, and to cricket, creating a splendid ground in front of the house which remains in use to this day.

Brother and sister had by then also developed a considerable enthusiasm for sailing. They started with a small schooner of 150 tons, the *Nore*, which was rapidly followed by a larger vessel of 250 tons, the *Lady Sibell*. In 1892 Joe, who had always been interested in ship design, produced some outline plans for a 230ft, 1,500 ton clipper, which was in essence a three-quarter sized version of the *Cutty Sark*. The basic design for the *Valhalla* was handed over to a well known naval architect, W. C. Storey, who produced detailed plans, including auxiliary steam power. The main construction contract was placed with Ramage & Ferguson of Leith, and the vessel was fitted out in Southampton. The critics were dubious, but she turned out to have excellent sailing qualities. The crew numbered 95, the majority of whom had served previously in the Royal Navy, and the vessel was well armed with two Hotchkiss cannons and a Maxim machine gun, as well as an assortment of rifles, pistols and cutlasses. The maiden voyage, between 22 March and 1 August 1893, took Joe and ten other 'idlers' from Southampton to Madeira and then into and around the Mediterranean to Constantinople, across the Black Sea to Sevastopol and back in due course to Cowes, a distance of 9,632 miles. The stay in port at Cannes was timed to coincide with Barbara's wedding there to Edward Mitchell-Innes, a barrister who later became a King's Counsel. In order to gain further

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experience, in 1894 Joe sailed to Australia in the clipper *Pericles*, insisting on carrying out the job of every man aboard during the long voyage.

Having declined his mother's suggestion that he should obtain a regular commission, Joe was as good as his word about joining the Yeomanry and was duly commissioned as a subaltern in his local regiment, the Sherwood Rangers. He was a keen and assiduous member, attending all the necessary courses and the annual camps. On one occasion during the latter, he led a squadron successfully across Salisbury Plain by night, a manoeuvre which brought him to the attention of John French, a coming officer in the Regular Army and himself a cavalryman. The two men formed a friendship, and French promised that, should there be a war in which he was involved, he would take Joe with him in some capacity.

In the summer of 1899 tensions between the British Government in South Africa and the two Boer republics in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State materially increased. The main issue at stake was voting rights for the 'Uitlanders', the largely British inhabitants of Johannesburg, Kimberley and other gold and diamond mining towns. The Boers were fearful that any concession would in due course result in a non-Boer majority, at least in the Transvaal, and regarded this as part of a ploy by the British to bring the two republics into a new federation under their control. The talks broke down and, on 9 October, the Government of the Transvaal delivered an ultimatum to the British to withdraw all troops on their borders and those of the Orange Free State, failing which war would be declared.

Even before this, British reinforcements had been arriving in South Africa. French had been earmarked to command a cavalry brigade and, true to his promise, sent Joe a telegram in mid-September, asking if he would like to join him on a ship leaving Southampton in a few days. Joe responded immediately: 'Delighted to come, can you get me recognized?' He was not part of French's official staff, neither at that time was his regiment earmarked to provide a contingent, although it did so later. He had no alternative, therefore, but to travel as a private individual and trust that French would be able to engineer his official appointment in due course.

French and his staff, who were led by Major Douglas Haig, embarked in RMS *Norman* on 23 September 1899 and arrived in Cape Town, via Madeira, on 11 October, just as war was declared. As the cavalry which he would be commanding was yet to arrive, French was sent temporarily to Ladysmith, where troops under Lieutenant General Sir George White were facing a large force of Boers. On the very morning of their arrival on 20 October, French, accompanied by Haig and Joe and with a mixed force including an infantry brigade under Ian Hamilton, was sent to Elandsplaagte to investigate reports that the Boers had taken the town. In order to push them back French carried out a textbook manoeuvre, involving a cavalry reconnaissance, an infantry attack and

then a cavalry charge, which resulted in a decisive victory. Joe was employed as a supernumerary staff officer, with a roving commission around the battlefield on French's behalf. This enabled him to participate in Hamilton's attack, in which he distinguished himself in disabling two Boer guns by dismantling their breech-blocks and carrying them back to the British lines. He also enabled news of the victory to be communicated to White by tapping the telephone lines alongside the railway.

Notwithstanding this success, White ordered French's force to fall back on Ladysmith. With the Boers closing in around the town, French, who saw no role for the cavalry in a siege, asked permission to withdraw. Against the wishes of White, the order came through from Cape Town for him to do so, and he and his staff escaped on the last train in a first-class compartment at the end of a luggage van. The carriage was hit by rifle fire, but the occupants escaped without injury to Durban, where on 4 November they embarked for Cape Town.

Joe had been mentioned in despatches for his role at Elandslaagte, and his position on the staff was now regularized. He accompanied French and Haig to De Aar, where French was to take command of a force covering the Colesberg area. On 10, 11 and 15 December the British suffered severe defeats at Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso, in what would come to be called 'Black Week'. Joe was highly critical of the performance of the British Army, writing to his mother: 'The school in which our leaders have been taught is the worst in the world: fighting against Zulus, Dervishes, etc. seems to make them forget all about tactics and strategy.'<sup>3</sup>

The disasters led to the overall command of the British troops in South Africa being transferred from Sir Redvers Buller to Lord Roberts. French, untarnished by the events of 'Black Week', had been engaged in a number of indecisive actions, but at least was active and was thus one of the few senior commanders retained by the new C-in-C. In the middle of January 1900, he sent Joe to see Roberts in Cape Town with despatches and maps to explain the position in his sector. Joe was also protesting, on French's behalf, at the appointment of Lord Erroll, one of Roberts's 'Ring', as his chief staff officer instead of Haig. The attempt failed and Erroll was appointed, but Haig stayed on as French's guest. Erroll was far from competent, so Joe found himself doing much of the work. Haig was subsequently given a column to command and asked Joe to join him, but Joe refused to leave French.

Roberts was now ready to begin his main offensive. On 14 February French, commanding the Cavalry Division, launched a wide turning movement to relieve Kimberley, taking the Boers by surprise, defeating the relatively modest opposition he encountered as a result and entering the town on the evening of the following day, in time for him and his staff to be entertained to dinner by Cecil Rhodes. A week later he began his advance on Bloemfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State, which fell on 13 March. Lack of supplies and a great

deal of illness, largely typhoid, delayed a further advance, but it resumed in mid-May, with Johannesburg falling on 31 May and Pretoria, the capital of the Transvaal, on 5 June. Three days later Joe had lunch in the latter with the Duke of Marlborough and his cousin, Winston Churchill, who had earlier escaped from the POW camp in the city, which he took Joe to inspect. Joe already knew Churchill, having met him in Ladysmith before his capture. The two men were to become good friends.

Most people, not least Joe, now thought that the war was over; consequently, he booked a return passage on RMS *Dunottar Castle* in early July 1900, his fellow passengers including Churchill. He had done exceptionally well on French's staff, distinguishing himself on a number of occasions, including one on which he had ridden through the night, accompanied only by a sergeant, to get an urgent message from French to Roberts. On another he found himself behind the Boer lines and was able to report to the troops facing them that the enemy was not nearly as strong as they had supposed. For these and his other services he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. He had also made some very influential friends, not only French, Haig, Hamilton and Edmund Allenby, but also Churchill and a young officer on Roberts's staff, 'Bendor' Grosvenor,<sup>4</sup> who had recently succeeded his grandfather as Duke of Westminster.

The relief of Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith had been accompanied in the United Kingdom by an outpouring of patriotic rejoicing, and those returning from the conflict were welcomed as heroes. Joe received an illuminated address from his neighbours in Nottinghamshire as the first volunteer from the Sherwood Rangers, whilst a shield, accompanied by an even more magnificent and illuminated parchment, was presented to him by the NCOs and other ranks of the Newark Troop of the regiment.

Joe was now aged thirty-three and it was time for him to marry. Numerous beautiful and highly eligible young women had crossed the threshold of Wiseton Hall over the years, but the two to whom he became attracted, Daisy, Countess of Warwick, who had previously been the mistress of the Prince of Wales, and Kitty, Marchioness of Downshire, were both married. He fathered two children by the former, but, after operating a *ménage à trois* with the latter, successful divorce proceedings by Kitty's husband forced his hand and he was honour bound to marry her. Born Katherine Hare in 1872, she was the daughter of the Hon. Hugh Hare, himself the younger son of the Earl of Listowel. She had married another scion of the Irish aristocracy, Arthur Hill, 6th Marquess of Downshire, in 1893, and the couple had had three children, Arthur, who was later to succeed his father, Francis and Kathleen, the last of whom was born in 1898.

Following her marriage to Joe in 1902, Kitty came with Kathleen to live at Wiseton. In the following year the couple's first child, Christian, was born, followed by Rosemary in 1905. Whilst Kitty was expecting Rosemary she had

a terrible motor accident in France, as a result of which one of her legs was amputated. She recovered very fast and refused to allow the disability to alter her life in any way, continuing to hunt, indeed establishing a reputation as a particularly hard rider, and even to play tennis. She also continued to bear children, and her third child, Robert Edward Laycock, was born in London on 18 April 1907.

## Chapter 2

### Bob

**B**ob Laycock was born into a life of wealth and privilege. The landed gentry, of which the Laycocks were members notwithstanding their relatively recent social ascent, were the backbone of rural England, although much of their wealth derived from the industrial towns of the Midlands and North. Joe himself certainly maintained a close interest in the Seghill Colliery and the family's other agricultural and business interests, which he used to visit regularly. He also retained a connection with the artisan skills of his forebears through his keen interest in engineering and, in particular, by working on a lathe which he had installed at Wiseton, on which he turned not only wooden but also ivory artefacts. The rest of the family, on the other hand, were far removed from the lives of those who created their wealth.

The family continued to grow, with a second daughter, Josephine, always called Joyce, being born in 1908, followed by Peter in 1910 and Michael in 1914. Tragedy struck, however, when the eldest child, Christian, died of appendicitis at Christmas in 1911. Described by his aunt as a 'darling, intelligent little fellow of eight, with very winning ways',<sup>1</sup> his death came as a great blow to Joe and Kitty.

Kitty was known to all the children and to others in the immediate family as 'Anne', named after a fictional mother rabbit who had so many offspring that she did not know what to do with them. This was an age when upper class mothers spent little time with their children, delegating the responsibility initially to a nanny, followed in due course by governesses for the girls, whilst the boys were despatched to boarding school at the age of eight or nine. This was true at Wiseton as well, but nevertheless this was a close and happy family, with a good deal of social interchange between the generations. Barbara Mitchell-Innes described Joe as 'the best friend to all of them, boys and girls alike. They all go to him for companionship and fun, as well as for advice, and there is no interest that they don't share with him.'<sup>2</sup> Kitty was decidedly more partial to the boys than the girls.

From an early age the leisure interests of the children, as with their parents, were centred around horses. Joe kept a very fine stable, and the young Laycocks were taught to ride almost as soon as they could walk. Once they could swing a mallet, they were all, boys and girls alike, encouraged to play polo, but the main interest was in hunting. The nearest hunts to Wiseton were the Grove

and the Rufford, since amalgamated, but their countries had largely been given over to the plough and were heavy going in some weathers. Although the family turned out on occasion with one or other of these, their preference was for the largely grass and woodland countries of the Belvoir, the Quorn and the Pytchley, some way to the south. For that reason Joe bought a house in Melton Mowbray, Newport Lodge, which had its own stables and was in constant use during the season.

Life at Wiseton sometimes verged on the chaotic, as the children, notwithstanding their closeness to their parents, tended to be wild and unruly. Numerous games were indulged in, some of which verged on the foolhardy. On one occasion they made a raft which was floated on the nearby Chesterfield Canal with the youngest, Michael, tied to it. On another, they fired a starting cannon down the drive of Newport Lodge; the wadding, which had been left in the barrel, narrowly missed a lady walking past the gates. Bicycle polo was particularly popular, in spite of the inevitable crashes. There was a menagerie of animals, including a goat, whilst Kitty even kept a monkey. Much of each summer was spent in the north-west Highlands of Scotland, where Joe rented a deer forest, initially at Letterewe and later at Arisaig, for stalking, shooting and fishing. The children were taught to use sporting guns at the earliest possible age.

In August 1914 the carefree life came to an end, at least for the adults, with the outbreak of war. Joe had kept up his close association with the Army, initially as an officer in the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry. His friendship with John French had endured, as a result of which he became known to many other senior regular officers, and every year he managed to attach himself to the staff of some general during the annual manoeuvres. In 1908 the yeomanry regiments were grouped into fourteen brigades, each of which was to have its own battery of Royal Horse Artillery. The Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry was brigaded with the South Nottinghamshire Hussars and the Derbyshire Yeomanry, and it was decided that a new RHA battery should be raised locally, with the command given to Joe, who was promoted from captain to major. Notwithstanding considerable scepticism in the Army about creating horse artillerymen out of amateur soldiers, Joe set about the task with great vigour, recruiting a battery sergeant major who had served previously as a sergeant in the regular RHA and two other former RHA sergeants to take charge of the orderly room and the riding school. Captain Wilfred Jelf was appointed as Adjutant, an office was acquired in Nottingham and general recruiting began, with a significant excess of applications over places. The officers were all personally known to Joe, many of them hunting friends. He allowed no expense to be spared in achieving his goal, using his own money where necessary to compensate for War Office parsimony. Twelve-pounder guns arrived shortly afterwards, the first camp was held at Wiseton during the following summer and in 1910 the battery impressed with its shooting at camp on Salisbury Plain.

On war being declared the battery moved initially to Norfolk with the Nottinghamshire Mounted Brigade. Joe himself was asked by French to join the staff of the British Expeditionary Force at Montreuil. The C-in-C was keen to retain him there, but Joe pressed constantly to rejoin his battery and to get it into action. It was not to France that it was sent, however, but to Egypt in the spring of 1915, and Joe went too, carrying a piece of paper confirming that he could return to the General Staff at any time.

Sent initially to Ismailia on the Suez Canal, the battery endured six months of boredom before being ordered to join the Western Frontier Force, formed to repel an attack by the Senussi, a religious sect in Libya which had been persuaded by the Ottoman Empire to declare *jihad* against the British. The Senussi had already taken the frontier port of Sollum and were advancing towards Sidi Barrani when a scratch force, consisting of the 15th Sikh Regiment, a Composite Yeomanry Regiment, the Nottinghamshire RHA Battery and some armoured cars was despatched to confront them. A series of engagements took place between mid-December 1915 and 14 March 1916, when Sollum was finally re-taken. Joe's battery distinguished itself in a number of these, as did the Rolls Royce armoured cars of the Cheshire Yeomanry, commanded by his great friend, the Duke of Westminster. As well as participating in the decisive operation at Agagia, in which the Senussi commander and his staff were captured, Westminster led a daring and successful raid to liberate the crews of two Royal Navy ships who had been captured by the Senussi, inviting Joe along for the ride.

Having spent a brief leave in England, Joe returned to Egypt in May 1916 to be appointed Commander Royal Artillery of the Australian and New Zealand Mounted Division, which was then in the Sinai Desert under Major General Harry Chauvel. The division comprised two cavalry and one mounted infantry brigade, supported by the Inverness-shire, Ayrshire and Somerset Batteries of 18 RHA Brigade. Joe tried to persuade Chauvel to include his own battery in the brigade, but although it was fully engaged in the Palestine campaign, it was as part of another division. The Anzac Mounted Division fought in the victorious battles of Magdaba and Rafa and the first and second battles of Gaza, following which the successful Turkish defence resulted in the replacement of Lieutenant General Sir Archibald Murray as Commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force by Joe's old friend from the Boer War, Lieutenant General Sir Edmund Allenby.

Joe, however, was not to serve under Allenby. Instead, whilst on leave in England in May 1917, he was appointed CRA Coastal Defences. Pressing to go to France, he eventually achieved his wish in February 1918. He was given no fixed appointment at first but spent a brief period as understudy to his former Adjutant, Wilfred Jelf, as the CRA of 33 Division. Douglas Haig, French's successor and another old friend with whom Joe had remained on excellent terms, used him temporarily as a senior liaison officer to General Pershing. In July 1918, now promoted to brigadier general, Joe was appointed CRA of

59 Division, which participated in the great Allied offensive leading to the Armistice on 11 November. After a 'good' war, his service was recognized by his appointment as a KCMG<sup>3</sup> in the Birthday Honours of 1919.

Bob's life, too, had had been subject to great change, but in his case it had nothing to do with the war and everything to do with his education. In September 1916, at the age of nine, he was sent to board at Lockers Park School in Hemel Hempstead. No explanation exists of why the school was chosen, but it was probably on the recommendation of friends. It was certainly a long way from Wiseton, but this was not unusual in an age when parents were not expected to visit their children very often, if at all, during term time.

The school had been founded in 1874 specifically to prepare boys for entry to Rugby, but by the time Bob arrived it was sending its pupils to a number of the leading public schools. Each of the houses was named after a naval or military commander and Bob was placed in Jellicoe (an admiral then at the height of his fame), possibly because at the time he entertained ideas of joining the Royal Navy. His academic progress up the school was slow at first. In the Summer Term of 1918, after two years at the school, he came first out of a form of twelve in one week and eighth in the next and in the subsequent exams. He was particularly good at arithmetic but, given his lifelong enthusiasm for books, surprisingly weak at English, his good use of grammar offset by poor spelling. In his last year, however, his academic performance was suddenly transformed, and in his final term in the top form he won the form prize.

He also excelled at sport, playing for the 1st XIs at football in the Autumn Term of 1919 and cricket (as wicket-keeper) in the Summer Terms of both 1919 and 1920. He was a member of a particularly strong cricket side, his contemporaries including Bryan Valentine, who went on to play for Cambridge, Kent and England, and Kenneth Carlisle, who later played for Oxford and Sussex.

There appears to have been no question but that Bob would follow his father to Eton, where he arrived for the Michaelmas Half in September 1920, being placed in A. E. Conybeare's House. His academic progress was comfortably above the average for his year, but by no means spectacular at first. He started specializing in Science, with a focus on Physics, at the beginning of his fourth year and in his last year moved to the Army Class, in which the curriculum omitted Classics altogether and concentrated on Maths, English, History and French as well as Science, which would become an abiding interest. Admission to the Army Class was by performance, and the very brightest boys could achieve this from the Removes, a year or more earlier than Bob; but his entry to it was still evidence of good academic achievement.

The Army Class was designed specifically for those destined for regular commissions via the Royal Military College, Sandhurst or the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, its members sitting the Army Entrance Exam rather than the Higher School Certificate. Most if not all of those in the class were also in