

OBITUARY

MAJOR CHARLES JOHN RICHARD ERRINGTON

12 August 1918 – 29 August 2022

A Pre-War Regular Officer who evaded a German massacre in 1940, survived five years as a Prisoner Of War (POW) and narrowly avoided the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946.

Major Charles John Richard Errington, always known as John, who has died aged 104, was the oldest surviving veteran of The Royal Scots (The Royal Regiment). Along with that achievement he was the last surviving officer commissioned into the Regiment (and possibly the British Army) before the Second World War. He was the last survivor of the epic stand by the Regiment's 1st Battalion (1RS), along with 2nd Battalion, The Royal Norfolk Regiment at Le Paradis holding part of the outer perimeter of the Dunkirk bridgehead. Their action, delaying the main German thrust over the three critical days of 27-30 May 1940, and fighting until the last round, assisted the bulk of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to slip behind them to escape from the harbour and beaches back to England, over 100 of those who survived the Battle, including many wounded, were subsequently massacred by troops of the German SS Division Totenkopf – a fact which only emerged towards the end of the War and has never been fully investigated.

After surviving the war as a POW, Errington re-joined the Regiment before being posted to the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies (MECAS) in Jerusalem to improve the Arabic he had learnt in the POW camp from a Palestinian civilian member of the Pioneer Corps. On 22 July 1946 their Arabic tutor kept them later than usual into their lunch hour. They would normally have lunched in the King David Hotel. At 12.26 that day the Hotel was virtually destroyed by a bomb planted by the Zionist insurgent group, the Irgun, killing 91 in and around the Hotel and wounding many more. John Errington always believed that their tutor knew what was about to happen and deliberately held them back that day.

John Errington was born on 12 August (The Glorious Twelfth!) 1918 at the family home, Beeslack, which was, quite literally, over the wall from the Regiment's Depot at Glencorse Barracks, just east of Penicuik. He was the second of two sons and two daughters. His father and maternal grandfather had both been Royals. He was educated at Wellington College. Keen to fly, he first joined the RAF and went to Cranwell. When his elder brother, Lancelot (Lance) elected to join the Civil Service, John, having qualified as a pilot, transferred to Sandhurst from where he was commissioned, in July of 1938, being the third direct generation of the family to join the Regiment. An earlier maternal forbear had fought with the Regiment at Waterloo. **(Lance went to Trinity College, Cambridge, achieving a double first, served in the RN during the War, and retired in 1976 having been Permanent secretary at the Department of Health and Social Security. On retirement he was knighted for his services. He died in 2001.)**

Errington deployed to France with 1RS as part of the BEF in 1939 in the appointment of Regimental Signals Officer. As such, he was issued with a motorcycle which delighted him. On 10 May 1940 the Germans launched their attack on Belgium and the Battalion moved forward to positions on the River Wavre. The German blitzkrieg forced them back into France and to a defensive position in the area around Le Paradis where he worked with Battalion Headquarters in a farmhouse. When it was set on fire they moved to a building across the road from where they successfully beat off German attacks. Errington positioned himself at the upstairs windows from where, and much to his delight, he knocked out some enemy light armoured vehicles with a Boyes anti-tank rifle. Under cover of darkness on the night of 27 May, and led by Major Bruce the Adjutant, and, by now the acting Commanding Officer, the survivors took shelter hiding in a barn a little distance away. Two mornings later (a local knocked on the door and asked for a cigarette) -

they had been surrounded by German troops and were captured. During that final battle he had sent two of his signallers off on his motorcycle to try and locate Brigade Headquarters. They never returned. He always feared that they had been killed or massacred as had many of the wounded soldiers left behind. It was seventy years later before he learnt the good news that they had been captured and survived.

After a very long march across Northern France and into Germany he spent five years as a POW. He remembered that he was never bored. He kept himself busy learning Arabic, as mentioned above, reading books sent from home. He had learnt to sail as a young boy and now studied sailing manuals to further his knowledge. This prepared him for a lifetime of sailing post War. His sister who lived on Mull arranged for food parcels to be sent to him from Edinburgh's best shops. These included cigars which he used as currency. He was respected by his German guards as he was able to turn his hand to many practical repairs in the Camp. At one point he was in Oflag V11-C with officers of the 51st Highland Division and remembers practising the newly invented Reel of the 51st Highland Division.

Post War, and after attending MECAS, he was posted to the Combined Intelligence Centre at RAF Habbaniya in the then Iraq. Whilst there he met Brenda Reeves who worked at the British Embassy in Baghdad. Apart from meeting his future wife, who he married at Habbaniya in June 1948, he enjoyed visiting the Embassy as he could get good whisky there at a reasonable price!

He attended The Staff College in 1950 before being promoted to Major and posted to Military Intelligence in the War Office in 1952 and, subsequently, Malaya during the Emergency from 1953-1956 for which he was Mentioned in Despatches 'for distinguished service'. After returning to the Regimental Depot at Glencorse, his final posting was to Libya in May 1958 again in Intelligence. At the end of this posting, he bought a car and, with a Sergeant, drove home to the UK, passing through France and visiting Le Paradis en route. This was the last time he visited the town. He took redundancy on March 1959.

In retirement, after attending Agricultural College in Aberdeen, he farmed the family farm in Kincardineshire. A noted sportsman in many fields he became a very enthusiastic dinghy and offshore sailor, sailing his cruising yacht, Prince Vreckan, well into his 90s and having taught all his family to sail. A grandson has become a Master Mariner. He enjoyed swimming and, aged over 100, still swam in the public baths in Kirkcudbright.

His wife, Brenda died in 2018, and one daughter, Jane, pre-deceased him in 2020. He is survived by his other two daughters, Leila and Anne, 6 grandchildren and 13 great grandchildren.

Colonel Robert Watson (Retr),
The Royal Scots (The Royal Regiment)
Thursday, 1st September 2022