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Soldier : The Autobiography

General Sir Mike Jackson

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Schoolboy

I am a soldier. I have held every rank in the British Army from officer cadet to four-star general. I am now retired, but my almost forty-five years of service ensure that I remain a soldier at heart. My father was a soldier, my elder son has been a soldier and my younger son is thinking about becoming a soldier. My father-in-law, my brothers-in-law and my son-in-law have all been soldiers – so the Army is something of a family tradition. But my father didn't push me in that direction, and what I have said to my sons is that it is your life, and therefore your call, and you must decide what you want to do with it. I am pleased that both of them have decided to follow the path I took, but I would have been entirely content had they chosen otherwise.

My father George Jackson served in the Army for forty years, without ever rising beyond the modest rank of major. He suffered a serious heart attack in the early 1950s and that put the kibosh on any further promotion. The Army was pretty ruthless about such matters then. My father never showed any resentment at this setback. If it ever went through his mind that he might leave the Army, he never mentioned it to me. He was a great gentleman, very courteous, and scrupulously honest; a delightful man, who always had a wry smile on his lips, perhaps indicative of his humorous attitude to life. I liked him and I respected him; to me he was always 'Pop'. My mother too was very loving, and ours was a happy, secure home. My parents were not strict in the Victorian sense, but they did set rules, and I grew up with a definite sense of what was right and what was wrong.

Pop was a tall, lean, dark man with a long nose, all features which he handed on to me. He sported a neatly trimmed moustache, a practice I have not emulated! Pop was an active and practical man, who'd been a member of the Boys' Brigade and who was very fond of playing football. In adulthood he became a keen motorcyclist. Mother was dark too, slight but none the less forceful, a strong, bright-eyed Yorkshire woman, who had been quite a beauty in her youth. She loved walking, and in her teens had done a great deal of hiking in the Peak District.



My father joined the Army in 1935 as a private soldier, becoming a trooper in the Household Cavalry. I can remember his telling me about being a member of the Sovereign's Escort at the coronation of King George VI, which sounded very impressive to a young boy. He didn't make the big leap to commissioned rank until about halfway through the Second World War, when he became an officer in the Royal Army Service Corps. I suspect that my parents waited until my father was commissioned to get married.

George was the youngest of five children of Charles Henry Jackson, the skipper of a deep-sea line-fishing vessel working out of Grimsby. My grandfather, whom I sadly never knew, had lost his father when he was only four and, having been sent to work on a Lincolnshire farm at the age of ten, had run away to sea in his late teens. The life of a long-line fisherman then was very hard, sailing small vessels up to Iceland and along the Greenland coast even in winter, often under brutal masters and in cruel conditions, defying icebergs and heavy seas in the search for cod and halibut up to 20 stone in weight. Such a harsh life left him unmarked, however, for Pop said that no family ever had a better father. My grandfather was patient, loving and fair; everyone who knew Charles Jackson respected him and his word, and looked upon him as a gentleman. In the First World War he served as a master of a minesweeper. In the Second World War, though by then well into his sixties, he again volunteered for service with the Royal Navy and was made master of a small vessel working out of Scapa Flow.

My parents must have met during the early part of the war when both were in their mid-twenties, though unfortunately I know almost nothing about the circumstances beyond the fact that Pop was then living in Bristol, and since my mother's death late in 2006 there is now no one left alive to tell me. My mother Ivy was from Sheffield, where her father, Tom Bower, had been an engineer in the steel industry who had lost his job in the Depression. She was a year older than my father, born five months before the outbreak of the First World War, and the only child of her parents, which was unusual for the period. (Her own mother had been one of eleven siblings.) An intelligent girl, she won a scholarship to Sheffield Grammar School, and when she met my father she was working as a curator at the Sheffield Museum.

Along with so many British soldiers, my father spent the early part of the war kicking his heels. He and my mother married on 7 March 1942, soon after he received his commission. I was born two years later, at my mother's home in Sheffield, just ten weeks before my father finally went into action on D-Day, 6 June 1944. He was second-in-command of a squadron of amphibious vehicles (DUKWs) whose function was to ferry men and materiel ashore. His squadron commander was killed on the first run in to 'Gold' Beach, so my father had to take command from then on. For him, as for so many others, D-Day was a baptism of fire. For his actions then and subsequently he was awarded the Belgian Croix de guerre and was mentioned in dispatches. Like so many of his generation, he was reluctant to talk about his experiences and, judging that it would make him uncomfortable, I didn't seek to push him to do so.



I don't know much about what Pop did for the rest of the war except that he took part in the Allied advance through north-west Europe, finishing up on VE-Day in Germany. After the war he was posted to Palestine, in the Mandate days, before the creation of the State of Israel. British soldiers were trying to keep the peace between Arabs and Jews, and might be attacked by either; it was no place for wives and children. So my early years were spent in Sheffield with my mother's family, and then in Aldershot when Pop came back from Palestine. In 1948 he was posted to Libya, an Italian colony which had been occupied by the British during the war, and which would become an independent kingdom in late 1951. My first memory is of sailing out by troop-ship with my mother to join him. I can dimly remember our cabin, and the fact that both of us were very seasick as the ship sailed through the Bay of Biscay. In Libya the sun seemed to shine every day. We lived in the capital, Tripoli, where I attended the British Forces primary school. I can remember the name of our street, the Via Generale Cantore. We had an Alsatian, Roly – too goodnatured to be a proper guard dog – and a pre-war Lancia with running boards, no doubt a legacy of the Italian occupation. In 1949 my sister Lynne was born in the British Military Hospital in Tripoli.

