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The Cross of Sacrifice  
Imphal War Cemetery  
With the poppy wreaths laid in memory of  
Major Hugh WALKER and Major 'Sandy' LAMBERT

## A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

# LIEUTENANT GENERAL SIR HENRY R. POWNALL

A concise biography of Lieutenant General Sir Henry Royds POWNALL, K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O. \*, M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*, an officer in the British Army from 1906 until 1945. He is notable for his roles as Chief of Staff in the British Expeditionary Force, in the Far East and South East Asia.

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**A Concise Biography of Lieutenant General Sir Henry R. POWNALL**

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**Lieutenant General Sir Henry Royds POWNALL, K.C.B.,  
K.B.E., D.S.O.\*, M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.***



## Introduction

Lieutenant General Sir Henry Royds POWNALL, K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O.\*, M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*, known to his colleagues as 'Henry', was an officer in the British Army from 1906 until 1945.

He served in the First World War, being awarded two medals for gallantry. He was awarded another between the wars whilst on active service in India. During the Second World War, POWNALL held several high-ranking key appointments across the world, in Europe, the Middle East and Far East.

His main achievements were in respect of his work as a chief of staff, both in France in 1940, and in the Far East and later South East Asia. As such, his notoriety is far less than other senior officers who held operational commands during the war.

## Family Background

Henry Royds POWNALL was born in London on 19 November 1887. He was the second son of Charles Assheton Whately POWNALL, who lived at St. John's Park in Blackheath, London. His mother was Dora Bourne ROYDS, hence the use of that family name in Henry's forenames. Henry's father was a consulting engineer to the railway bureau of Japan, so having been born in London, at the age of three years, Henry moved with his family to live in Japan.

At the age of eight years, Henry was sent to Rugby School, in Warwickshire, England. His father had been educated there, and as was common in this period, the son followed the father's footsteps.

He applied for entry to the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, and on being successful in his application and examination, he entered there in 1904 as a Gentleman Cadet. He completed the two years' long course, finishing in the top fifteen in the final examination, to be commissioned in the Royal Regiment of Artillery on 20 December 1906; just after his nineteenth birthday. He was commissioned in the rank of Second Lieutenant, with the service number of 3553.

POWNALL was clearly well regarded as he was awarded his 'Jacket' early in his service, meaning that he was posted to a battery of the Royal Horse Artillery (R.H.A.). With the R.H.A., he saw service in the United Kingdom and at Lucknow in India. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant on 20 December 1909, the second anniversary of his commissioning.

## The Great War (First World War)

With the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, POWNALL's unit, 'A' Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, returned to the United Kingdom. From there it was deployed to France, arriving on 28 October 1914. Shortly after the outbreak of the war, POWNALL was promoted to the rank of Captain on 30 October 1914.

He left France on 18 January 1915 to return to the United Kingdom to become the officer commanding 'C' Battery, 91<sup>st</sup> Brigade, Royal Field Artillery. This brigade was part of the 20<sup>th</sup> (Light) Division, which itself was part of KITCHENER's New Army.

Although formed in September 1914, this division was far from being ready for operational deployment. It was short of officers and equipment, the artillery consisting of twelve-year-old guns that arrived from India in February 1915. The division concentrated in the Aldershot area of Hampshire to begin the process leading to active service. In April 1915, the division moved to Salisbury Plain for full scale training prior to deployment. It was inspected by King George V on 24 June 1915 and was judged fit for operations overseas in France and Belgium.

POWNALL returned to France with his battery on 21 July 1915, the division concentrating in the St. Omer area by 26 July. Familiarisation training was undertaken in the Fleurbaix area. The division first saw action in the Battle of Mount Sorrel in early 1916, this being a local operation in which the division recaptured the feature together with Canadian troops. The division served on the Western Front for the rest of the war. Battles in which the division participated in during 1916 were five actions that formed phases of the overall Battle of the Somme, namely:

- Delville Wood,
- Guillemont,
- Flers-Courcelette,
- Morval,
- Le Transloy.

On 29 September 1916, POWNALL was promoted to the rank of Acting Major. This was superseded when on 31 March 1917, he was promoted to the substantive rank of Major. He was awarded the Military Cross on 1 January 1917, *'for distinguished services in the field'*. POWNALL was given a staff role on being appointed the Brigade Major, Royal Artillery to the 17<sup>th</sup> (Northern) Division with effect from 12 April 1917. This formation was another of KITCHENER's New Army, and it had been in France since July 1915. The Division had seen some action since then.

On POWNALL's arrival in the division, the Arras Offensive was already underway. This commenced on 9 April 1917 and continued until 16 May 1917. The division was involved in the First and Second Battles of Passchendale later that year, these being phases of the Third Battle of Ypres. In 1918, the division was involved in the First Battle of the Somme, and then the battles of Amiens, Albert and Bapaume, which were phases of the Second Battle of the Somme. Next followed the battles of Havrincourt, Epehy and Cambrai as the Allies attacked the Hindenburg Line. The division then took part in the pursuit of German forces to the Selle. At the time of the armistice on 11 November 1918, the division was to the south of Maubeuge. In the first few days of peace, the division moved back to an area to the west of Le Cateau, and then to Amiens, and finally into billets around Hallencourt.

Demobilisation commenced in January 1919, with the division disbanding at the end of May 1919. POWNALL was awarded the Distinguished Service Order on 1 January 1918, again '*for distinguished services in the field*'. With the end of hostilities, POWNALL remained in France for a further six months whilst the division ran down. In addition to the award of the Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross for gallantry, he was awarded the following campaign medals, namely the:

- 1914 Star,
- British War Medal,
- Victory Medal.

## Between the Wars

The end of the First World War saw POWNALL still serving as the Brigade Major, Royal Artillery 17<sup>th</sup> (Northern) Division in France. He continued in this post until the 5<sup>th</sup> March 1919 when he returned to the United Kingdom. His next appointment was as the adjutant to the VI Field Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, based in Ewshott, Surrey. He commenced this role on 11 February 1920, and he remained in post until 30 December 1921.

POWNALL applied for the Staff Course, successfully passed the entrance examination, and was accepted for the 1922 course. He attended the Staff College at Camberley, an important step in any officer's career, as this course trained the more highly rated Army officers in staff work. This opened up appointments as staff officers within the Army, and thereby the opportunity for advancement. In the post-war British Army, promotion was on the basis of seniority within your regiment. It was not unusual for officers to remain Lieutenants for five to nine years, and then serve as Captains for up to ten years. Not all officers would reach the rank of Major before compulsory retirement on the basis of age at fifty years. This made the application for the staff course very competitive, so completing the two year long course and being able to add the letters *p.s.c.* (passed staff course) to your entry in the Army List was an important determinant of your career prospects.

The first staff appointment given to POWNALL came on 1 April 1924, when he was posted as a General Staff Officer (Class CC) at the School of Artillery at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain. This was the main depot and training base for the Royal Artillery in the United Kingdom, and it where that friends and contacts were made across the Regiment as a whole.

On 31 December 1925, he was transferred from the School of Artillery to become a General Staff Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade (Instructor) at the Staff College at Camberley, Surrey. To be selected to serve on the directing staff at the Staff College was a prestigious appointment. On assuming the role, as all instructors held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, POWNALL was promoted to the rank of Temporary Lieutenant Colonel. During his tenure at the Staff College, POWNALL was promoted to the rank of Brevet Lieutenant Colonel. Service at the Staff College allowed the instructing staff the opportunity to develop their own views on military strategy and tactics.

Other instructors at the Staff College with POWNALL also went on to achieve high office in the British Army, namely:

- General Sir Edwin Logie MORRIS,
- General Sir Richard O'CONNOR,
- General Sir George GIFFARD,
- Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Ralph EASTWOOD,
- Lieutenant General Arthur Nugent FLOYER-ACLAND,
- Lieutenant General John George Walters CLARK.

POWNALL left the Staff College on 20 January 1930 and moved to India to take up regimental duties again. He served on the North West Frontier for which he was awarded the campaign medal and clasp. In addition, POWNALL was Mentioned in Dispatches on 6 May 1932. On the same date, he was awarded a Bar to the Distinguished Service Order, *'for distinguished services rendered in the field in connection with military operation on the North West Frontier of India during the period October 1930 – March 1931.*

POWNALL was now seen as an officer of significant potential, so was selected to attend the 1932 course at the Imperial Defence College, Buckingham Gate, London. The Imperial Defence College opened in 1927 to provide for the higher education of senior officers from the Royal Navy, the Army and Royal Air Force. In addition to which, some senior civil servants and senior officers from the dominions also attended each course. There were usually nine or ten officers from the British Army on each course, two of whom came from the British Indian Army. Each held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, either substantively or by Brevet. The duration of the course was one year, and covered general principles of defence, organisation for war, issues of imperial defence, strategy and international relations. Some projects were allocated from the Chiefs of Staff to the students to complete during their course. All successful students had the initials *i.d.c.* added to their entry in the Army List.

On completion of the course, POWNALL went on to serve on the Committee of Imperial Defence, on which he was the Military Assistant Secretary. The chairman of the committee was Sir Maurice HANKEY. POWNALL remained as the Military Assistant Secretary for over two years, until 30 April 1935. On 31 January 1935 POWNALL was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Just four months later, on 1 May 1935 POWNALL was promoted again, this time to the rank of Colonel (his seniority dated from 1 January 1932). This coincided with him being raised to be the Senior Assistant Secretary (graded as General Staff Officer 1<sup>st</sup> Grade) of the Committee of Imperial Defence.

On 1 April 1936, POWNALL became the Deputy Secretary of the same committee, a temporary appointment. On 23 June 1936, POWNALL was made a Companion of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath (C.B.), an unusual award to an Army officer in the rank of Colonel, but this was in recognition of POWNALL's work with the Committee of Imperial Defence. Sir Maurice HANKEY offered POWNALL the role as chairman of the committee, but, POWNALL asked to leave the committee and be given an operational command.

He was instead selected to become the Commandant of the School of Artillery at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain. He was promoted to the rank of Temporary Brigadier on taking up his new appointment with effect from 15 September 1936. His time at the School of Artillery was limited, as on 26 March 1938, POWNALL was promoted to the rank of Major General and appointed the Director of Military Operations and Intelligence at the War Office in London. His period of tenure at the War Office coincided with that of General The Viscount GORT, who had become the Chief of the Imperial General Staff on 6 December 1937. This period was a time of significant change at the War Office. The Viscount GORT had been appointed by the Minister of War, Mr HORE-BELISHA ahead of other officers more senior in service than him.

## The Second World War

The declaration of war by the United Kingdom on 3 September 1939 was by then inevitable, and the outcome of a rising tide of international events. With the outbreak of war, the British Army put into effect mobilisation plans for the deployment to France of a British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.), in the same manner as the country had only some twenty-five years earlier. General The Viscount GORT had been designated as the Commander-in-Chief of the B.E.F., and with his good relations with POWNALL it was not a surprise that he was appointed the Chief of Staff of the B.E.F.. POWNALL was granted promotion to the rank of Acting Lieutenant General on taking up the new appointment on 4 September 1939.

At first, the newly appointed member of staff of the B.E.F. started to gather at the War Office, to then move to the Staff College at Camberley on 13 September. General The Viscount GORT travelled to France on 14 September in company with Lieutenant General Sir John GILL (General Officer Commanding I Corps) and his personal staff. The rest of the staff appointed to General Headquarters followed over the next few days. The General Headquarters, British Expeditionary Force was established in the Chateau de la Blanchardiere, at Le Mans, which the French Government had made available to the British government. By 21 September, all the key personnel (including POWNALL) were in situ at Le Mans. Negotiations took place with the French Army, and an agreement reached for the B.E.F. to occupy a sector along the Belgian border. So General Headquarters, B.E.F. moved in and around Habarcq (eight miles west of Arras) on 2 October. The first phase of the deployment of the B.E.F. was completed by 11 October 1939, with four infantry divisions and two corps headquarters established.

The Secretary of State for War, Mr. HORE-BELISHA, reported to Parliament that '158,000 men had been transported to France'. In addition to the personnel transferred to France, some twenty-five thousand vehicles had been sent to France. The B.E.F. continued to grow as the Territorial Army formations were mobilised, with selected formations being sent to France. This was the period of the so called 'Phoney War', but it did allow the British and French Armies time to prepare. There were frustrations amongst the senior officers at this time, as Lieutenant General BROOKE, the General Officer Commanding II Corps related by describing GORT (and by association POWNALL) of being too optimistic in the then current situation.

## The Pill-Box Affair

During this build-up, an incident occurred which became known as the 'Pill-Box affair'. The Minister of War, Mr HORE-BELISHA had become increasingly unpopular amongst a group of senior officers in the British Army. The foremost of these was General The Viscount GORT. In spite of the fact that Mr HORE-BELISHA was instrumental in appointing GORT as Chief of the Imperial General Staff in 1937, the relationship between the two deteriorated significantly.

Henry POWNALL was a staunch ally of GORT, and he also became increasingly antagonistic towards HORE-BELISHA. In his diary of May 1939, POWNALL contrasted the two men. He described GORT as a great gentleman, and HORE-BELISHA as an obscure, shallow-brained, charlatan, political 'Jewboy'. In other comments by POWNALL and GORT, they described HORE-BELISHA as conceited, ignorant, self-seeking and untrustworthy. POWNALL also held the belief that HORE-BELISHA intended to 'bitch-up the higher organization of the Army in order to make the position of C.I.G.S. impossible'. In October 1939, the troops moved forward to the Belgian border, to find the existing defences inadequate. The concrete pill-boxes could not accept the size of British guns, therefore, the existing ones had to be altered and new pill-boxes built.

HORE-BELISHA arranged for British contractors to be sent to France to undertake this work, and arranged for designs of pill-boxes to be drawn up. At first, General The Viscount GORT welcomed this, and even examined the various designs. The Chief of the General Staff, General IRONSIDE, and POWNALL saw this involvement of HORE-BELISHA through a different perspective. The Minister of War was a politician and given to self-publicity. POWNALL felt that the involvement of HORE-BELISHA was just another publicity stunt. In November, HORE-BELISHA visited the B.E.F., and saw many of the troops in the area. Apparently, he did not visit the defence positions then under construction although he did have discussions with Major General PAKENHAM-WALSH, the Chief Engineer of the B.E.F.. For some reason, HORE-BELISHA came to the conclusion that the pill-boxes were not being built quickly enough in the British sector, and was led to believe that French pill-boxes were being built in only three days.

On his return to London, HORE-BELISHA wrote to GORT stating:

*The impression that is deepest in my mind is of the great knowledge which you show of every detail. Your interest in the task and in the men is most inspiring. I do not suppose we have ever had a commander who kept in such close touch with men and things. You will emerge from this business having done a good job of work for the country and as a national figure.*

*I am seeing the engineers tomorrow. I really think the **pillboxes** should spring up everywhere. The Dominions representatives and Anthony Eden commented on their absence. I thought you would like to know this. Gamelin told me in Paris that they could make them in three days apiece.*

*He also said they were lining and flooring their trenches with cement and that you could have cement works in the area. He hoped you would send down some officers to study their methods.*

Whatever the intention behind the letter, this letter was not received well at General Headquarters, B.E.F.. As Chief of Staff, it is likely that POWNALL would have read the letter. In any event, the letter was taken as criticism of the senior officers within the B.E.F. and of General The Viscount GORT in particular. On 24 November, having received comment from the three Ministers of the three main Dominions who had recently visited France, HORE-BELISHA informed the Cabinet about his reservations in respect of the building of the pill-boxes. Unfortunately, this comment was made after the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (IRONSIDE) had left the room.

HORE-BELISHA returned to the War Office and called a meeting of the Army Council. He asked for Major General PAKENHAM-WALSH to be present. HORE-BELISHA informed the meeting of the concerns, and he told PAKENHAM-WALSH that the Prime Minister was concerned, as were the Ministers from the Dominions. It was stated that the defences along the British Sector were inadequate, with favourable comments being made of the French defences nearby, even though they had been built by the B.E.F.. HORE-BELISHA told PAKENHAM-WALSH to return to France and convey the Army Council's concerns direct to General The Viscount GORT.

On receipt of this message, GORT was furious. He interpreted this intervention as unjustified and a clear criticism of his leadership. This view then circulated throughout the B.E.F.. POWNALL then played a key role in this affair, by advising his view of the events to the King's Private Secretary, Sir Alexander HARDINGE. In addition, he told other key, influential people in London of the incident and how this had undermined the leadership of the B.E.F., just at the time when this was crucial. With this matter now having reached the ears of the King and the Prime Minister, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (IRONSIDE) travelled to France to meet with GORT. He reported back that the B.E.F. was building pill-boxes of a high standard and as quickly as possible. HORE-BELISHA wrote to GORT on 3 December advising him that the matter of the pill-boxes was now placed in perspective, and the matter was closed. This was not the end of the matter, and GORT found out that the minutes of the Army Council had been amended by HORE-BELISHA to include a statement that he had not intended to offend the Commander-in-Chief.

The King was briefed by IRONSIDE, and he decided to visit France himself in December. He spent a week in France and examined the defences as well as meeting many of the troops. He was told of the annoyance that HORE-BELISHA's actions had caused. The British Prime Minister CHAMBERLAIN, was also moved to visit the B.E.F., and received similar briefings from GORT when they met on 15 December. GORT took the opportunity to tell the Prime Minister about the severe shortage of equipment, in particular tanks. On CHAMBERLAIN's return to London, he wrote to GORT stating: *'I was particularly impressed by the great progress that has been made, in so short a time, and despite many difficulties, with the construction of the defences.'*

GORT replied paying tribute to HORE-BELISHA's attributes and praising the many reforms he had brought about in the British Army. CHAMBERLAIN spoke with HORE-BELISHA, who was not aware of the level of the disquiet against him. There is no doubt that Leslie HORE-BELISHA had indeed brought about significant and positive changes to the British Army in the run up to the Second World War, but he decided to move HORE-BELISHA to the Board of Trade. This was a clear demotion, which HORE-BELISHA refused to accept. He left the government and faded into obscurity. The great irony of this incident is that when fighting broke out, the pill-boxes were made obsolete.

## The German Invasion

By the time of the German invasion of the Low countries, the B.E.F. comprised some 316,000 men, organised in three corps with ten infantry divisions. On 10 May, as the German troops entered the Netherlands and Belgium, the B.E.F. entered Belgium as far as the River Dyle. Instead of making the advance into Belgium the main point of advance, the German forces drove through the Ardennes and into the heart of France. As the B.E.F. and the French Army in Belgium became isolated as the German Army reached the coast of the English Channel, GORT made the brave decision to order the withdraw of his forces back to the coast at Dunkirk. This decision was taken without reference to the French or the Prime Minister and General Staff in London. This one decision saved the B.E.F. from wholesale incarceration, and following the success of the evacuation from Dunkirk, the Prime Minister felt confident enough to decide not to seek a peace agreement with Germany in the autumn of 1940.

POWNALL was ordered to leave on 29 May by GORT, so handed over to Major General Oliver LEESE as acting Chief of the General Staff. During this period, POWNALL is described as exhibiting calmness and foresight. He worked closely with GORT and played his role in ensuring the subsequent evacuation from Dunkirk was a success. When General Sir Alan BROOKE was asked to head the second British Expeditionary Force to return to France in June 1940, he asked for POWNALL as his Chief of Staff, but was advised he was not available as he was writing the dispatches about the first B.E.F. and the operations in France.

For his services in France, POWNALL was created a Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (K.B.E.) on 11 July 1940 and became Sir Henry POWNALL. He was Mentioned in Dispatched on 20 December 1940 as well as receiving the knighthood.

## Return to the United Kingdom

With the dissolution of the B.E.F. on its return to the United Kingdom, POWNALL was left without a role. Until a substantive role became available, on 1 July 1940 he was appointed the Inspector-General of the Local Defence Volunteers; otherwise to be known as the Home Guard. He retained his rank of Acting Lieutenant General but was promoted to the rank of Temporary Lieutenant General on 4 September 1940.

This role oversaw the rapid recruitment and development of the Local Defence Volunteers (L.D.V.). The new Prime Minister, Winston CHURCHILL, saw this as important for the defence and morale of the country, and was pleased to have an Army officer of the standing of POWNALL in charge. The operational effectiveness of the L.D.V., however, was always open to question, and when POWNALL met General Sir Alan BROOKE, (who was now Commander-in-Chief of Home Forces) on 17 August 1940, BROOKE was not impressed with the developments and proposals articulated by POWNALL.

An opportunity for a command appointment came on 1 October 1940, when POWNALL replaced Lieutenant General HUDDLESTON as the General Officer Commanding British Troops in Northern Ireland (B.T.N.I.). As there were then two field formations now deployed in the Province, on 12 July 1940 a new appointment was made as General Officer Commanding-in-Chief British Troops in Northern Ireland (B.T.N.I.), a Lieutenant General's position. Lieutenant General HUDDLESTON, a member of the Reserve of Officers, was the first incumbent, with POWNALL being his successor. There were two areas in B.T.N.I., each comprising one division:

- Northern Area (61<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division),
- Southern Area (53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division).

The role of B.T.N.I. was to prepare for:

- Action against enemy forces invading Eire,
- Action to repel an enemy invasion of Northern Ireland,
- A combination of both of the above,
- Dealing with enemy raids on the coast,
- Action against the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.).
- Control of the Eire – Northern Ireland border.

This was a delicate situation, as actually the government of Eire was concerned about the build-up of British forces in Northern Ireland and feared invasion of their newly independent country. Fortunately, there were no flash points and the island of Ireland remained at peace.

On 19 May 1941, POWNALL was posted to the War Office to become the Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff. The Chief of the General Staff at this time was General Sir John DILL, with whom POWNALL had served in France. POWNALL replaced Lieutenant General 'Bob' HAINING, who was not highly rated by the key decision makers of the time. POWNALL was known to DILL, and he was highly rated as a staff officer.

This period was one of the lowest ebbs in respect of the British Army. Japan had not yet entered the war, so the focus was on defending the United Kingdom from possible invasion and re-equipping the British Army in the U.K. following the loss of most materiel in France. In the Middle East, Greece had been lost, Crete was under attack, and all the gains in Italian Libya had been lost to the German Africa Corps.

There were military operations in Persia, Iraq and Syria; all making demands on limited resources. It is suggested that again POWNALL had issues and disagreements with some of the key advisers to the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, Winston CHURCHILL; but this does not appear to have affected his relationship with CHURCHILL himself.<sup>1</sup>

## Far East Command and A.B.D.A. Command

On 5 December 1941, POWNALL was sent to the Far East and left the Home Office. He had been selected by the new Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan BROOKE, to replace Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert BROOKE-POPHAM as Commander-in-Chief of Far East Command. The original choice was General PAGET, the Commander-in-Chief of Home Forces; but then CHURCHILL decided to replace General John DILL as Chief of the Imperial General Staff (C.I.G.S.). DILL was promoted to the rank of Field Marshal and was originally destined to become a Governor-General in India, but he was then sent to Washington instead. Personally, CHURCHILL favoured Lieutenant General Archibald NYE as the new C.I.G.S., but sound judgement prevailed, and General Sir Alan BROOKE was appointed instead. PAGET was then chosen to replace BROOKE as Commander-in-Chief Home Forces, POWNALL was sent to the Far East instead of PAGET, and NYE replaced POWNALL as Vice Chief of the General Staff.

Far East Command was formed on 18 November 1940, to improve coordination by bringing three independent commands together under the newly established higher formation, to which was added the R.A.F. Far East Command. The Royal Navy, however, remained independent. Far East Command comprised:

- Malaya Command,
- Burma Command,
- British Forces in China,
- R.A.F. Far East Command.

At this time, Japan had not entered the war, although the slide towards war seemed to some inevitable. BROOKE-POPHAM was seen as being too elderly and not able to lead this command in war. POWNALL left the United Kingdom on 4 December 1941, bound for Singapore. On 8 December 1941, everything changed when Japanese troops invaded Malaya and Hong Kong, and shortly afterwards Burma. POWNALL was in Cairo on this date, and he was ordered to wait there whilst matters were reassessed. He then flew onto Delhi to meet WAVELL, who was then the Commander-in-Chief of the Army in India. POWNALL arrived in Singapore eventually on 23 December 1941 and assumed command from BROOKE-POPHAM.

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<sup>1</sup> See MEAD, *Churchill's Lions* (2007) – Page 361.

By this date, Hong Kong was on the verge of collapse, and several reverses had already been suffered in Malaya. Both H.M.S. Repulse and H.M.S. Prince of Wales had been sunk, and although the Royal Navy was not his responsibility, the loss of these two capital ships reverberated throughout the Far East. Matters continued to deteriorate, so on 15 January 1942 a new American, British, Dutch and Australian Command (A.B.D.A.) was formed to coordinate all the campaigns across the South West Pacific region. General Sir Archibald WAVELL was appointed the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, with POWNALL as his Chief of Staff. The headquarters was established initially at Singapore, but it moved to Java. Two days after taking up his appointment, POWNALL was granted the substantive promotion to the rank of Lieutenant General.

Whereas Far East Command had been a British higher formation, A.B.D.A. Command was a multinational affair, as its name suggests. The Deputy Commander-in-Chief was a Lieutenant General from the U.S. Army Air Force. Staff for the new command were difficult to obtain, and the command was doomed from the beginning. Event quickly overtook the new command, and with the surrender of Singapore on 15 February 1942, the A.B.D.A. Command became redundant. The Command was wound up on 25 February 1942, the order to do so being received two days previously. It had been in existence for just over one month. POWNALL left with most of his staff on 27 February on board the Kedah, a former yacht now impressed into government service. Although the yacht avoided Japanese air or sea attack, the engines on the yacht broke down more than once, with the delays requiring water to be rationed.

When A.B.D.A. Command came into existence, Hong Kong had fallen already; by the time it closed Malaya and Singapore were lost, the Philippines were close to falling, and the Netherland East Indies was already doomed to fall. On 3 December 1942, POWNALL was Mentioned in Dispatches for services in the South West Pacific. With the dissolution of A.B.D.A. Command, POWNALL relinquished his appointment as Chief of Staff. As he was located in Ceylon, and the threat of invasion of that island was now a real possibility, the defences of that country were upgraded. On 7 March 1942, POWNALL was appointed the General Officer Commanding Ceylon in the rank of Lieutenant General.

There was one infantry division based on Ceylon, including an East African brigade, and a couple of anti-aircraft brigades. The immediate threat of invasion had passed by the end of 1942, but Ceylon remained at risk as its role was now crucial, in particular for Naval operations in the Indian Ocean. On 7 February 1943, POWNALL handed over responsibility for Ceylon to Lieutenant General WETHERALL and departed for Baghdad. Just prior to his departure, it was announced that he had been awarded the Order of Orange Nassau by the Queen of the Netherlands with effect from 15 January 1943. In addition, POWNALL had been appointed a Colonel Commandant of the Royal Regiment of Artillery with effect from 3 December 1942.

## Persia and Iraq Command

Persia and Iraq Command was responsible for the two countries, both of which were invaded and occupied by British forces in 1941. They were considered essential to the British war strategy for two reasons: firstly, the supply of oil to the United Kingdom; and secondly as a supply route to the Soviet Union. The General Officer Commanding-in-Chief was General Sir Henry WILSON. He had been in post since the creation of the command on 15 September 1942. WILSON was now to replace General ALEXANDER as the Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East, so POWNALL was directed to replace WILSON. By the date of his appointment, Persia and Iraq Command was relatively peaceful and straightforward. There was large supply and transport presence in the two countries, with the United States playing a major role in supply equipment and materiel to the Soviet Union.

## South East Asia Command

POWNALL had only been in command of Persia and Iraq Command for seven months when a major development in the Far East meant another move for him. The main Allied powers had decided to create two Supreme Commanders in the war against Japan. The Supreme Allied Commander Pacific was an American command, with the Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia being a British command. POWNALL was one of four senior Army officers considered for the role as Supreme Commander, South East Asia Command. The others being General Sir Henry WILSON, General Sir George GIFFARD and General Sir William PLATT. In the end, Admiral Sir Louis MOUNTBATTEN was chosen to be the new Supreme Commander, South East Asia Command, and he needed a Chief of Staff to run his new headquarters. With his experience of the theatre of operations, and the high regard in which POWNALL was still held, he was the logical choice for the British Chiefs of Staff Committee.

The appointment of POWNALL was an astute one by the Chiefs of Staff, as it was felt that his experience and 'wise old head' would control some of MOUNTBATTEN's known exuberance, and POWNALL himself saw his role as *'supplying a steadying influence as his chief of staff'*.<sup>2</sup> General Sir Alan BROOKE wrote of this appointment, *'I had selected Henry POWNALL as the most suitable staff officer for MOUNTBATTEN. I had full confidence in his ability and considered he might counter some of Dickie's lack of balance and general ignorance in the handling of land forces.'*

POWNALL was appointed to his new role on 16 September 1943, and he flew to Delhi to commence establishing the new headquarters. It took two months before the new headquarters became operational on 16 November. It was clear that Delhi was not a suitable location for the headquarters of South East Asia Command, so on 15 April 1944, the headquarters reopened in Kandy, Ceylon. The headquarters grew to be a large and complex organisation, with over two-thousand personnel serving there. As Chief of Staff, POWNALL's role was to coordinate the work of the whole organisation, which meant a significant number of meetings and long hours.

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<sup>2</sup> BOND B. (ed), *Chief of Staff The Diaries of Lieutenant General POWNALL (1972)*.

This role also involved POWNALL returning to London for conferences and meetings, one trip being in May 1944 for a Chiefs of Staff Meeting. POWNALL's health was steadily declining; he was now fifty-seven years of age and had been holding demanding roles continuously for five years. He was diagnosed as suffering from a kidney stone, and he was admitted to hospital on 12 August 1944. He was in hospital for one month, and then convalesced for a further month. POWNALL returned to Kandy on 6 October. He stood down as Chief of Staff on 26 December 1944. Lieutenant General 'Boy' BROWNING came from the U.K. to replace him, after Lieutenant General's SWAYNE and NYE had been ruled out for the appointment. POWNALL was rewarded with elevation to the rank of Knight Commander in the Most Honourable Order of the Bath (K.C.B.) in the New Year's Honours List of 1945.

Lieutenant General POWNALL did not hold another post in the British Army and retired on 8 September 1945. He continued in his role as one of the Colonels Commandant of the Royal Regiment of Artillery until January 1952, the usual ten-year term of this appointment.

## Post Retirement

In his retirement, POWNALL was to play a very significant role in the historiography of the Second World War when Winston CHURCHILL asked him to join the writing team for his six volumes of the *History of the Second World War*. Although CHURCHILL was later awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953 '*for his mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values*', in fact he employed a team of trusted individuals who wrote the draft text for him, which he then edited. This team included Lieutenant General Lord ISMAY, Frederick William Dampier DEAKIN (known as Bill DEAKIN), Gordon ALLEN and Denis KELLY.

POWNALL wrote most of the drafts for the chapters and sections relating specifically to military actions and campaigns, drawing on both his own experiences of events and on official papers. In respect of naval and air force matters, POWNALL had friends from those two services to assist him in writing the chapters. The team working for CHURCHILL had some tight deadlines to meet, and had to take account of the then current political climate so it was a demanding time for them all, albeit CHURCHILL paid them for their services. One can argue that this post-war literary role was POWNALL's greatest war-time achievement of his career, as the six volumes of *The History of the Second World War* became bestsellers of their time and still provide an authoritative framework for any military historian studying this period in world history.

POWNALL entered business and became the Chairman of the brewery Friary Meux in London. The Meux's Brewery was founded in 1764, and by the Second World War was a well-established brewery in London. In 1956, Meux's merged with Friary, Holroyd and Healy's Brewery in Guildford to form Friary Meux Limited. This new firm went into liquidation in November 1961.<sup>3</sup> In addition, POWNALL served on the committee of Lloyds Bank.

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<sup>3</sup> His entry in *Who's Who* does not give any dates for his involvement with either Meux's or Friary Meux Ltd.

His other interest was with the St. John Ambulance Brigade. He was appointed Commander of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem on 28 June 1946, and then Knight of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem on 8 July 1947. He was Chief Commissioner of the St. John Ambulance Brigade between 1947 and 1949, and then Chancellor of the Order in 1951.

## Family Life

Henry POWNALL married Lucy Louttit GRAY on 10 December 1918. She was the widow of the late Captain J. GRAY, an officer in the 36<sup>th</sup> Sikh Regiment who was killed in action at Kut al-Amara in 1916. Lucy GRAY was the youngest daughter of the late William HENDERSON from Aberdeen. Mrs Lucy POWNALL died in 1950. POWNALL and his wife had no children.<sup>4</sup> He did have a step-son, John Willoughby GRAY, who was born around the time of his father's death in Iraq, served with G.H.Q. Phantom Regiment in North West Europe in 1944 and 1945, and later became a successful actor.

## Death and Obituary

Lieutenant General Sir Henry Royds POWNALL died on 9 June 1961, aged seventy-three years. He was living at 6, Launceston Place, London W.8 at the time of his death and left an estate of £46,425 10s, a sizable sum for this period.

His diaries were published in 1972, being edited by B. BOND. They are entitled 'Chief of Staff, which sums up POWNALL's own view that he spent most of his service during the Second World War as Chief of Staff, as opposed to actually commanding formations. During his service on the North West Frontier, POWNALL is described as '*widely liked but had few intimate friends*' and also '*a first class horseman*'.<sup>5</sup>

There is no doubt that his close friendship and admiration for The Viscount GORT was part of the reason for his selection as Chief of Staff for the British Expeditionary Force in 1939. POWNALL described his feeling as being pleased to '*serve under so great a gentleman and so fine a soldier*'. The problem for him was that this opinion of GORT was not universally shared amongst the senior officers of the British Army. GORT was known for his involvement in the minutiae of detail. This, in part, led to the unsavoury Pill-Box incident. MONTGOMERY described POWNALL as '*completely useless*', but it must be borne in mind that MONTGOMERY had an acerbic side to him and was very critical of officers outside of his circle of admirers. Although GORT's influence in the British Army waned considerably after the fall of France, POWNALL's reputation did not suffer significantly.

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<sup>4</sup> In his entry in the Oxford National Biography, it states that he had one son, which was his stepson John, although his entry in Who was Who (which was prepared by POWNALL himself) makes no reference to any children.

<sup>5</sup> BOND (ed), *Chief of Staff, The Diaries of Lieutenant General Sir Henry POWNALL* (1972).

With the publication of his diaries, POWNALL emerges as a thoughtful and intellectual officer. During the 1930's, he was opposed to the concept of 'limited liability' put forward by Basil LIDDELL-HART and others. The concept put forward was that it was not inevitable that the United Kingdom would be drawn into a European War, and therefore, would not have to form an expeditionary force to be sent to France. Several politicians favoured this view, as it also allowed for constraint of spending on the military and defence matters.

POWNALL openly criticised LIDDELL-HART, and described the Prime Minister, CHAMBERLAIN, as having '*ideas on strategy (that) would disgrace a board school*'. POWNALL held the view that any future war would be 100%, and even then, that the United Kingdom could lose it. Part of POWNALL's distrust of the Minister for War (1937 – 1940), Leslie HORE-BELISHA, was because he used LIDDELL-HART as an adviser, and he was perceived to be under his influence on military matters. POWNALL was a more orthodox officer, and was concerned about LIDDELL-HART's role, which he viewed as improper and irresponsible.

The time POWNALL spent on the Committee for Imperial Defence was instrumental in developing his reputation as an efficient and effective staff officer. The length of time he served on this committee demonstrates that he was respected, and his views held influence on some key people. He was acknowledged as being widely read, and knowledgeable on military history as was proved by his involvement in drafting sections of the '*History of the Second World War*'. His friend and co-author, Lord ISMAY, who succeeded him as Deputy Secretary of the Committee for Imperial Defence, described POWNALL as '*one of the best brains of my vintage in the Army, courageous, competent and cool as a cucumber*'.<sup>6</sup> Outside of his Army life, he enjoyed skiing, fly-fishing and golf. He was a gifted linguist and a pleasant person in conversation with a dry sense of humour.

Lieutenant General Sir Wilfrid LINDSELL, who served with POWNALL in the B.E.F., said of him:

*He certainly possessed all the qualities for success in any branch of Staff work or in command. He has the essential basis of sturdy common sense, a well-balanced knowledge of his profession, no fear of taking responsibility and plenty of initiative and energy.....of a serious turn of mind and always imperturbable in a crisis..... Quick and precise in manner, he was an energetic worker, bringing the solution of all his problems a clear, well-ordered mind. To all who served under him, he was quiet, courteous and sympathetic chief. He had a remarkable memory and as a masterly writer of minutes and reports.*<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, POWNALL can be classed as an orthodox military officer, for example, he was not keen on the mechanization of the Army, however, he did more accurately predict the British Army's involvement in France, and also highlighted the lack of preparation in the Far East. He held several key posts, but he did not hold an operational appointment that brought him to prominence post-war and in consequence, his role in the Second World War is often overlooked.

<sup>6</sup> Oxford National Biography, POWNALL Henry Royds, by Brian BOND.

<sup>7</sup> Oxford National Biography, POWNALL Henry Royds, by Brian BOND.

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