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A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

MAJOR GENERAL R. F. JOHNSTONE

A short biography of Major General Reginald Forster JOHNSTONE, who served in the British Army between 1926 and 1959. He was a brigade commander in Burma in 1945 and at Trieste in 1947 to 1950. His last appointment was as Director of Personal Services at the War Office.
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A Concise Biography of Major General Reginald Forster JOHNSTONE

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Major General Reginald Forster JOHNSTONE, C.B., C.B.E.

Introduction

Major General Reginald Forster JOHNSTONE an officer in the British Army during the Second World War, when he commanded an East African brigade during the Burma campaign. Immediately after the end of hostilities, he was posted to assume command of an infantry brigade located at Trieste in Italy, during the tense period while the city was a Free Territory under the auspices of the United Nations. His final appointment was as the Director of Personal Services at the War Office.

Early Life and Education

Reginald Forster JOHNSTONE was born on 14 May 1904 in Thingoe, Suffolk, although he appears to have been known as 'Raymond' throughout his life. He was the third child, and second son of Edwin James JOHNSTONE (1872 – 1946), and his wife Marian Ada Yeo JOHNSTONE (1870 – 1954). They had four children together, namely:

- Winifred May JOHNSTONE (1897 – 1913)
- Cyril James JOHNSTONE (1902 – 1981)
- Reginald Forster JOHNSTONE (1904 – 1976)
- Charles William JOHNSTONE (1909 – 1993)

Edwin JOHNSTONE came from Bromley in Kent, and he served in the First World War with the Royal Fusiliers, even though he was aged forty-two years. In 1914, he was living at Burrswood, Groombridge in Sussex. Edwin JOHNSTONE died on 29 November 1946, while living at 31, Ashchurch Park Villas, Shepherd's Bush, London.

Reginald JOHNSTONE was educated at Charterhouse School, a private school located at Godalming in Surrey, and Cambridge University where he was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Early Military Service

JOHNSTONE was commissioned in The Royal Scots (The Royal Regiment) on 3 February 1926 (service number 34843) as a University Candidate from the General List of the Territorial Army. His seniority was effective from 14 August 1925. He was promoted Lieutenant with effect from 14 August 1928. JOHNSTONE was seconded to the Colonial Office on 13 June 1929 for service with the King's African Rifles. Between the First and Second World Wars, as promotion was slow within the British Army, and opportunities for interesting postings limited, several officers volunteered to serve with the British Colonial forces in East and West Africa.

When on secondment, they were usually given greater responsibility than in their own regiment, and also the costs of Army life were cheaper in Africa than at home. Lieutenant JOHNSTONE completed nearly six years abroad, and when his secondment ended on 4 May 1935, he returned to regimental service.

On 2 March 1937, JOHNSTONE was promoted to the rank of Captain, and on 27 November of that year, he was appointed the Adjutant of the 7th/9th Bn. The Royal Scots. This was a Territorial Army (T.A.) unit based in Edinburgh. He was one of the few Regular Army personnel serving with this T.A. infantry battalion, and his role was to act as the staff officer to the commanding officer, preparing orders and training programmes, ensuring the discipline and standards within the unit, and advising on Army rules and regulations.

His appointment ended on 21 January 1939, and he was then posted to the Staff College at Camberley as a student on the Staff Course. This course was seen as a key element in the progression of a Regular Army officer's career, as it allowed a qualified officer to undertake staff roles within the Army, and it also was an indicator of the likely promotion in due course to the rank of Colonel or beyond. JOHNSTONE's course was curtailed with the outbreak of war, and he returned to regimental duties.

The Second World War

Between 10 January and 25 March 1940, JOHNSTONE was promoted to the rank of Acting Major, presumably as a company commander. Having reverted to the rank of Captain for a short period, he was re-granted the rank of Acting Major on 2 August 1940. On 17 August 1940, he became a Temporary Major, having held the acting rank for the required three months.

On 15 October 1941, JOHNSTONE was promoted to the rank of Acting Lieutenant Colonel. Again, after three months, he was promoted to become a Temporary Lieutenant Colonel and War Substantive Major. This meant that even though he was a substantive Captain, he would not drop below the rank of Major during the period of hostilities. On 18 July 1942, JOHNSTONE reverted to the rank of Major as he travelled to Shetland. On his arrival on 12 August 1942, he was re-granted the rank of Temporary Lieutenant Colonel, on assuming command of the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Scots. This was a war-raised unit, which was formed on 6 June 1940 as the 50th (Holding) Battalion of the regiment, being redesignated as the 12th Battalion with effect from 9 October 1940. It was stationed around Fraserburgh and Peterhead in north-east Scotland and comprised men called up with the outbreak of war.

The battalion moved to Shetland in October 1941, and while it was stationed there, it was redesignated as the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Scots, to replace the battalion that had been captured at Hong Kong in December 1941. This took place on 28 May 1942. The battalion moved to Caithness in November 1942, and the Battalion Headquarters was based at Thurso.

The long winter months in the north of Scotland were dismal, and Lieutenant Colonel JOHNSTONE instituted special exercises and took steps to maintain the physical fitness of his soldiers. On 10 March 1943, orders were received to move to Fife, to prepare for service overseas, and on 14 April 1943, the battalion sailed on the Dunnottar Castle from the River Clyde bound for an unknown destination.

The news was broken to the men of the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Scots when they were at sea that their destination was to be Gibraltar. This was met with almost universal disgust, as after all their time spent on the Shetland Islands and in northern Scotland, the battalion was hoping for a more active role than undertaking garrison duties again. The soldiers were considered to be in first-class condition, and highly trained for battle. The battalion disembarked on 25 April, and it was reorganised to fulfil its special duties on 'the Rock'. Gibraltar was too cramped to allow training to be undertaken, so companies were sent to Oran in Algeria, now in Allied hands, to do so. JOHNSTONE tried his best to maintain the level of efficiency of the battalion, with short, intensive periods, including a three-day march with night exercises.

While stationed in Gibraltar, the soldiers of the Royal Scots performed ceremonial duties, including the Ceremony of the Keys, and the battalion also found the guards for Government House. Every Friday, the Pipe Band beat the Retreat on the barrack square. The battalion did well in sports, the football team winning The Rock Cup, and they also won the Garrison Senior League Championship and Shield. There were V.I.P. visitors to Gibraltar, which include the British Prime Minister and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

On the downside, the battalion began to feel stale. Routine duties such as providing about three-hundred men daily to muck out the tunnels dented the ability and morale of the soldiers. One officer wrote *'No Commanding Officer could have done more, in intensely difficult conditions, to keep up our morale and physical fitness and training.'* This legacy was to pay dividends when, at last, the battalion was sent to Italy in June 1944 as part of the 66th Infantry Brigade.

Before the battalion was posted to Italy, however, JOHNSTONE left to assume command of the 22nd (East Africa) Brigade, which was then based in East Africa. He took up his appointment on 13 June 1944, aged forty years, on promotion to the rank of Acting Brigadier. Lieutenant Colonel J. T. CAMPBELL replaced JOHNSTONE as C.O. of the 2nd Bn. The Royal Scots, and he was to lead them on active service in Italy.

Brigade Commander

The Brigade that Brigadier JOHNSTONE was now in command of comprised three infantry battalions, and a company of East African Engineers.

The order of battle for the brigade was:

22nd (East Africa) Infantry Brigade

Headquarters, 22nd (East Africa) Infantry Brigade Group & Signal Section

1st (Nyasaland) Bn. The King's African Rifles

3rd Bn. The Northern Rhodesia Regiment

1st Bn. The Rhodesia African Rifles

59th (East Africa) Field Company, East African Engineers

Of the three battalions, there was the 1st (Nyasaland) Battalion of the King's African Rifles. The soldiers were recruited from the British colony of Nyasaland, which is now known as Malawi. As with all the African infantry battalions, the officers and senior non-commissioned officers were white, but the soldiers (known as Askari) were black. The 3rd Battalion, The Northern Rhodesia Regiment recruited its soldiers from the British colony that is now called Zambia. The 1st Battalion, The Rhodesia African Rifles was the only battalion of this regiment that saw active service during the Second World War, comprising black African soldiers from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Again, all the officers were white.

Brigadier JOHNSTONE led the brigade on its departure from East Africa on 10 July 1944, when it sailed for Ceylon. It arrived in Ceylon on 23 July 1944, where it remained on garrison duties until 3 December 1944, when it sailed for Burma.

The 22nd East African Infantry Brigade functioned as an independent formation to provide protection on the flanks of the main divisions during the Arakan campaign. It served in Burma from 10 December 1944 until 31 August 1945, under the command of XV Indian Corps. The brigade landed first at Akyab, but then re-embarked on landing craft to be transported to Ru-Ywa. It landed there and then moved down the coast towards Taungup. The brigade was ordered to hold the Mai Chaung and to relieve the 4th Indian Infantry Brigade from the 26th Indian Division. It was then attached to the 82nd (West African) Infantry Division to assist in clearing the Taungup area. The brigade then conducted a wide encircling move, entering Dalet on 17 April 1945. By 8 May, the brigade was located in the Taungup Pass, with the Japanese 28th Army retreating out of the Arakan.

JOHNSTONE was made a Temporary Brigadier six months after his date of appointment as the brigade commander. The brigade remained in Burma following the surrender of the Japanese under Burma Command. JOHNSTONE was Mentioned in Dispatches on 9 May 1946 for his services in Burma as a Temporary Brigadier. He was promoted to the substantive rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Scots on 17 August 1946. Brigadier JOHNSTONE participated in a conference held on 12 February 1946 between the Commanders of the British Forces in Burma, and the Commanders of the Japanese Forces in Burma.

Fifteen Japanese officers were present, and they were asked questions by the British officers about the Burma Campaign in 1942, through the end of hostilities in August 1945.

Trieste

With the disbandment of the 22nd (East Africa) Brigade in 1946, JOHNSTONE transferred in 1947 to the command of the 24th Independent Infantry Brigade in Trieste, a disputed city between Italy and Yugoslavia. The city of Trieste was in Italy pre-war, but it was also claimed by the Yugoslav partisans to be incorporated within post-war Yugoslavia. Fighting took place between the 2nd New Zealand Division and pro-Allied Yugoslav 4th Army, against the German and pro-fascist Yugoslav forces. The New Zealanders secured the city on 2 May 1945, with some 13,000 Chetniks surrendering to the Allies, having covered some 220 km in less than a week. The pro-Allied partisans had surrounded the city on 1 May, with the New Zealanders arriving the next day, and the fighting continuing into 3 May, leading to the final surrender by the German forces.

Due to the ethnically mixed population, and the disputed claims to governance, the Free Territory of Trieste was established on 10 February 1947 by a protocol in the Treaty of Peace with Italy, and it came into effect on 15 September 1947 under the mandate of the new United Nations. Its administration was divided into two areas, Zone A and Zone B. Zone A was under British and U.S. control, with Zone B being under Yugoslav control. Major General Terence AIREY was appointed the British General Officer Commanding Zone A with effect from 15 September 1947. This zone was 222.5 square kilometres and contained 262,406 residents, mainly in the city of Trieste.

In October 1948, the Soviet Union began objecting to nominations for Governor of the Free Territory, and tension in the region increased. The Allied Military Government had 5,000 U.S. troops, and 5,000 British troops in the Free Territory. The British troops were known as BETFOR, standing for The British Element Trieste Force, of which the 24th Infantry Brigade was the main component. Brigadier JOHNSTONE, therefore, held a key appointment in this early Cold War stand-off between Yugoslavia, backed by the Soviet Union, and Italy, backed by the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The Free Territory was dissolved on 5 October 1954 by the London Memorandum, with Zone A passing to Italy and Zone B to Yugoslavia. This agreement was not ratified until 1977 by the Treaty of Osimo, which had been agreed in 1975.

In spite of post-war instability due to the constant changing of personnel within units he has been successful in providing an example of military efficiency which has impressed the American contingent of the force and the particularly critical and not always well-disposed civil population, doing much to sustain British prestige in adverse circumstances.

During his tour of service in the Free Territory, the situation has often been abnormal. In September 1947, when the Treaty of Peace with Italy was ratified, Brigadier JOHNSTONE's brigade, together with the American contingent, played a key part in the establishment of the new frontier between Italy and Trieste, and in the setting up of the Free Territory. This task included the withdrawal of our troops and government from the ceded areas and the maintenance of law and order among an excited population. Brigadier JOHNSTONE handled this brigade most effectively throughout the military phase of this operation which involved withdrawal in the hours of darkness through excited and hostile Slovene villages. This operation was complicated by a Yugoslav ultimatum which I received after dark and an attempt to occupy Trieste city by a coup-de-main which necessitated prompt and firm action by Brigadier JOHNSTONE's brigade in the British sector.

Throughout the long period of frontier incidents and internal unrest which followed, I found him to be a tower of strength. He has also done much to strengthen the good relations which exist between the British and American troops confined in this small area.

The recommendation was written by Major General T. B. AIREY, C.B., O.B.E., GOC in C, BETFOR, on 14 March 1950, at the time that Brigadier JOHNSTONE was leaving Trieste. He relinquished command of the 24th Brigade in March 1950, and he returned to the United Kingdom where he was appointed the Deputy Director of Military Intelligence at the War Office. He held that appointment for three years, after which he became the Deputy Adjutant-General of the British Army of the Rhine in West Germany. JOHNSTONE was promoted to the substantive rank of Brigadier, as that rank had been formalised in the British Army post-war, with effect from 1 January 1953.

Now aged fifty-two years, and with thirty years service in the British Army, JOHNSTONE was rewarded for his performance both in operational roles and staff roles in the rank of Brigadier with his appointment to the post of Director of Personal Services at the War Office in London. On 1 September 1956, JOHNSTONE was promoted to the rank of Temporary Major General to coincide with his appointment to head a Directorate in the War Office. Personal Services was one of the major Directorates in the Adjutant-General's Branch of the British Army. It had six main sections, dealing with:

- A.G.8 – Discipline,
- A.G.9 – Honours, awards, and policy regarding promotion,
- A.G.10 – Pay,
- A.G.11 – Ceremonial events and duties,
- A.G.13 – Accounts,
- A.G.14 – Pensions.

It also oversaw the Chaplaincy Directorate within the army.

JOHNSTONE was promoted substantively to rank of Major General on 28 May 1957. As was usual with an Army officer reaching this rank, in the Queen's Birthday Honours List of 12 June 1958, Major General JOHNSTONE was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath (C.B.). He relinquished his appointment at the War Office on 24 November 1959, and he retired from the Army on 22 December 1959, at the age of fifty-five years.

Raymond JOHNSTONE married Madeline Thornhill SIMPSON on 26 September 1935 at Sandal Magna, St. Helen, in West Yorkshire. After his retirement, they lived at The Cedar's House, Gough Lane, Bracknell, Berkshire. Major General JOHNSTONE died on 10 May 1976, leaving an estate of £43,154. It is not known whether they had any children, but he was survived by his wife.

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