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Author: Robert PALMER, M.A.

**A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:**

# **MAJOR GENERAL W. A. M. STAWELL**

A concise biography of Major General William Arthur MacDonald STAWELL, C.B., C.B.E., M.C., *p.s.c.*, who was an officer in the British Army from 1914 until 1948. Commissioned into the Royal Engineers, he enjoyed a varied career, the highlight of which was being the head of the Special Operations Executive in the Balkans in 1943 and 1944.  
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## **A Concise Biography of Major General W. A. M. STAWELL**

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Author: Robert PALMER, M.A. (copyright held by author)  
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## Contents

|                                 | <u>Pages</u> |
|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Family Background               | 3            |
| The Great War (First World War) | 3 – 4        |
| Between the Wars                | 4 – 5        |
| The Second World War            | 5 – 7        |
| Post Second World War           | 7            |
| Family Life and Retirement      | 7            |
| Bibliography and Sources        | 8            |

## **Major General William Arthur MacDonald STAWELL, C.B., C.B.E., M.C., *p.s.c.***

Major General William Arthur MacDonald STAWELL, C.B., C.B.E., M.C., *p.s.c.*, who was known to his colleagues as 'Billy', was an officer in the British Army between 1914 and 1948. He was commissioned in the Corps of Royal Engineers, but during the Second World War, his main employment was as a staff officer. In November 1943, he was chosen to travel out to the Middle East to assume command of the operations of the Special Operations Executive in the Aegean Sea and Balkans region. Ill-health brought him home in late 1944, and he undertook two other administrative roles before his retirement.

### **Family Background**

William Arthur MacDonald STAWELL was born in Arhat, Bengal, British India, on 2 January 1895. He was the only son of Lieutenant Colonel George Cooper STAWELL, and his wife, Kathleen STAWELL (nee DEANE). His father was born in Australia in 1862, and he served in the British Indian Army. He died in 1942. His mother was nine years younger than her husband, and she died in 1951. 'Billy' was baptized at Arrah Shahabad in Bengal on 22 February 1895.

Billy STAWELL was sent to Clifton College in Bristol for his education, this being a private school where Billy was a boarder. He succeeded in passing the entrance examinations for the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, and he commenced his training there prior to the outbreak of the Great War.

### **The Great War (First World War)**

STAWELL was commissioned in the Corps of Royal Engineers on 12 August 1914, in the rank of Second Lieutenant, with the service number 8463. STAWELL was posted to the Signal Service, which at the time was part of the Royal Engineers. He served with the Guards Signal Company, which was attached to the Guards Division. Lieutenant STAWELL arrived in France on 4 August 1915 with this division, having been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant with effect from 23 July 1915. On 23 June 1916, he became the Officer Commanding 22 Signal Company, with the rank of Temporary Captain. On 1 January 1917, the award of the Military Cross to Captain STAWELL was announced in the London Gazette, but unfortunately, the citation is not available today. On 17 March 1917, STAWELL was promoted to the rank of Acting Major, while still in command of the 22 Signal Company, but then in the following month, Major STAWELL was seriously injured in action. His femoral artery was cut, but prompt action by the medics saved his life. He had to relinquish the rank of Acting Major, with effect from 21 April 1917, and he returned to the U.K. to convalesce, and that of Temporary Captain on 2 August 1917. As some compensation, on 3 November 1917, Lieutenant STAWELL was promoted to the substantive rank of Captain.

After over a year recovering from his wound, on 4 November 1918, Captain STAWELL arrived in eastern Europe to serve in the theatre that covered Greek Macedonia, Serbia, Bulgaria, European Turkey and the Islands of the Aegean Sea. He was there when hostilities ceased with Germany on 11 November 1918, with hostilities with Austro-Hungary and Turkey having ended a few days previously. For his service in the First World War, Captain STAWELL was awarded the 1915 Star, the British War Medal, and the Victory Medal, in addition to his Military Cross. On 12 November 1918, STAWELL was again promoted to the rank of Acting Major.

## Between the Wars

On 6 July 1919, STAWELL relinquished the rank of Acting Major, and he was posted to India on attachment to the Queen Victoria's Own Madras Sappers and Miners, one of the three corps of engineers in the British Indian Army. On 1 September 1929, STAWELL was promoted to the rank of Major, at the age of thirty-four years and with fifteen years' service with the Royal Engineers. He applied for and was accepted on the Staff Course, which was then of two year's duration, and he qualified successfully. This meant that he had the letters *p.s.c.* added to his entry in the Army List, and it gave him the opportunity to be selected for staff appointments within the Army. This was also seen as a route to advancement within the British Army, and this proved to be the case with Billy STAWELL.

On 1 March 1931, Major STAWELL was appointed as a General Staff Officer, 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, to the War Office in London. On 1 November 1932, he was transferred to the role of Brigade Major with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade based in Aldershot Command in Hampshire. Major STAWELL left this role on 28 February 1935, and he sailed for India.

On his arrival in India, Major STAWELL took up an appointment as a Deputy Assistant Adjutant-General (D.A.A.G.) in the Directorate of Organization in Army Headquarters in Delhi. The Directorate was part of the Adjutant-General's Branch, and it was responsible for recording the details of all personnel within the British Indian Army by means of a Hollerith Card Index system. At the beginning of the war, the Organization Directorate comprised seven sections. These were:

- A.G. 1 – Co-ordination,
- A.G. 2 – Recruiting,
- A.G. 3 – Cavalry and Infantry,
- A.G. 4 – Artillery, Engineers, Signals and R.A.I.S.C.,
- A.G. 5 – Mobilisation,
- A.G. 6 – Ordnance Personnel,
- A.G. 7 – Auxiliary Force (India) and Indian Territorial Force.

It is known which section that Major STAWELL worked, but he would have been responsible for a team of Army and civilian personnel within one of these sections.

After just short of two years in this role, Major STAWELL returned to the United Kingdom and with effect from 2 November 1937, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. It is believed that he assumed the role of Commander Royal Engineers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, based at Aldershot, at this time, as he was definitely in this role at the outbreak of the Second World War. The General Officer Commanding the Division was Major General ALEXANDER, who STAWELL was later to serve with in the Mediterranean in 1944. Lieutenant Colonel STAWELL would have been responsible for Royal Engineers in the Division when it moved to France in late September 1939, including their mobilisation, and training.

## The Second World War

On 13 February 1940, Lieutenant Colonel STAWELL was transferred to become an Assistant Adjutant and Quarter-Master General, probably of an infantry division in the U.K. or France. On 16 March 1940, STAWELL was promoted to the rank of Acting Colonel. After the evacuation from Dunkirk, on 17 July 1940, STAWELL was given a different appointment, this time as a General Staff Officer, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade. He was promoted to the rank of Temporary Colonel on 16 September 1940, after serving six continuous months as an Acting Colonel. He did not hold this post long, as in the turbulent period after Dunkirk, Colonel STAWELL was posted to the War Office as a Deputy Director of Military Intelligence with effect from 18 November 1940. On the same date, Colonel STAWELL was promoted to the rank of Acting Brigadier upon taking up his new appointment.

Brigadier STAWELL was to remain in the Directorate of Military Intelligence for fifteen months, during which he was promoted to the substantive rank of Colonel on 14 February 1941 (his seniority dating from 2 November 1940) and to the rank of Temporary Brigadier with effect from 18 May 1941, after six months holding the acting rank.

On 14 February 1942, Brigadier STAWELL left the War Office to take up an operational command, as the commanding officer of the 145<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. This brigade was part of the 48<sup>th</sup> (South Midland) Infantry Division. In this period, the Brigade comprised:

Headquarters, 145<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade & Signal Section

2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. The Gloucestershire Regiment

4<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

1<sup>st</sup> Bn. The Buckinghamshire Regiment

The 48<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was based in I Corps District, and it was deployed around the East Riding of Yorkshire and north Lincolnshire. It was employed on coastal defence duties having been reduced to the Lower Establishment in November 1941. This meant that the Division was not deemed fit for operational deployment overseas, and its main role was training, and providing drafts of soldiers for other formations.

After nine months in command of an infantry brigade, Brigadier STAWELL was again posted into a staff role, this time as Brigadier General Staff of Southern Command, based near Salisbury in Wiltshire. He assumed this new role on 19 November 1942. This appointment made Brigadier STAWELL the senior staff officer in the Command, which covered all of southern England, with the exception of the south-east counties of Kent, Sussex and Surrey. The General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Southern Command in this period was Lieutenant General Henry LOYD. The threat of invasion by Germany was now negligible, but this was the time when preparations commenced for the Allied invasion of France, and the arrival of large numbers of U.S. Army troops.

Twelve months later, a major change in the career of Billy STAWELL occurred, with his promotion to the rank of Acting Major General on 27 November 1943, and his posting to Cairo in Egypt to head the Special Operations Executive in the Middle East. Most of the work of S.O.E. in this theatre was in the Balkans, in the country of Yugoslavia, and it was known as Force 133. STAWELL replaced Lord GLENCONNER, a civilian and former banker, who had run the operations of the S.O.E. in the region since 1942. There were tensions within the Army in the Middle East over the role and reporting structure of the S.O.E., which led to the forced removal of Lord GLENCONNER. The Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East wanted to have an Army officer in command, to better exert control over the activities of the S.O.E., and to better coordinate its activities with that of the Army. STAWELL had experience of Military Intelligence, and proven staff abilities, yet he was untainted by any previous involvement with the S.O.E., so he was seen as a suitable candidate.

STAWELL was an organized man, who had previous knowledge of the Balkans, the different nationalities, religious groups, and political factions. The British Prime Minister, Winston CHURCHILL, had decided to support the communist partisans, led by TITO, which was a brave decision in many ways. Major General STAWELL had to oversee, plan and co-ordinate fast-moving, undercover and subversive operations. He required significant qualities of diplomacy and determination, and resilience to surmount the difficulties involved in this work.

The S.O.E. supported rival guerrilla bands, and co-ordinated other Allied offices and commands, themselves almost as fractious as the guerrillas. It took until the spring of 1944 for Major General STAWELL to establish his headquarters in Italy, known as H.Q., Special Operations, Mediterranean. This allowed him to be closer to the Supreme Commander's headquarters, as well as the field of operations in the Balkans. The move of the headquarters was delayed by the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Command, General Sir Bernard PAGET, who was reluctant to relinquish his control of S.O.E. operations. It appears that Major General STAWELL did his job well, having the fight the corner for the S.O.E. politically, while remaining focused on the military tasks required of his personnel. Throughout all this, STAWELL remained objective, and did not get too engrossed in Balkan politics.

On 1 January 1944, in the New Year's Honours List, Major General STAWELL was appointed a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (C.B.E.) for his role as head of the S.O.E. in the Mediterranean. On 27 November 1944, after holding the acting rank for twelve months, Major General STAWELL was promoted to the rank of Temporary Major General. Shortly afterwards, in December of that year, Major General STAWELL became ill, and he relinquished his role as head of the S.O.E. in the Mediterranean and he returned to the U.K. on sick leave. On 20 September 1945, Major General STAWELL was made a Companion of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath (C.B.) for his work as head of the S.O.E. in the Mediterranean.

## Post-Second World War

Having recovered his health sufficiently to resume active service, in November 1945, Major General STAWELL was appointed as the Deputy Chief of Operations for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. This organisation was based in Germany, and it was charged with assisting the millions of displaced people, many of whom were destitute, resulting from the chaos of the Second World War.

In August 1946, Major General STAWELL was appointed the Deputy Chief of Intelligence of the Allied Control Commission in Germany. On 23 March 1948, STAWELL was one of the first group of British Army officers to be formally promoted to the rank of Brigadier, which was back-dated from 1 November 1947. On 2 October 1948, Major General STAWELL retired from the British Army with the honorary rank of Major General, on retired pay, and he became a member of the Reserve of Officers. On reaching the age of fifty-eight years, Major General STAWELL reached the age limit on liability to recall, so he ceased to be a member of the Reserve of Officers.

## Family Life and Retirement

STAWELL married Amy BOWRING (1904 – 1986) in Manhattan, New York, U.S.A., on 15 May 1926. They had one son together, William Bowring STAWELL, who was born on 7 March 1928 in London. In his retirement, STAWELL and his wife lived as a house called 'Crobeg' on The Common, Southwold, Suffolk. Being born in British India, STAWELL had to apply for British citizenship, which was granted on 9 September 1974.<sup>1</sup> In his retirement, STAWELL enjoyed yachting, playing golf, and participating in local community affairs.

STAWELL is described as a tall, fair, and handsome man, who was also kind and gentle in manner. As such, he was much liked, trusted and respected by his friends and colleagues.<sup>2</sup> Major General 'Billy' STAWELL, C.B., C.B.E., M.C., *p.s.c.*, died at home of heart failure on 11 June 1987, aged ninety-two years. He left an estate of £1,182,494. His son, William, died in 2002.

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<sup>1</sup> The Home Office certificate was numbered 541865.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford National Biography on STAWELL, see Bibliography.



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