

Brian Urquhart, Troubleshooter for the U.N., Dies at 101

He was best known for creating and directing the U.N.'s peacekeeping operations in conflict-filled areas around the world.

By Robert D. McFadden

Jan. 3, 2021

Brian Urquhart, a troubleshooting British diplomat who joined the United Nations at its birth in 1945 and over the next four decades was a chief aide to five secretaries general while directing peacekeeping operations around the world, died on Saturday at his home in Tyringham, Mass. He was 101.

His son Thomas confirmed the death.

Mr. Urquhart (pronounced IRK-it) was no James Bond, but he was kidnapped and severely beaten by rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo, leapt out of an airplane at 1,200 feet and survived when his parachute partly failed as he landed. He led peacekeeping forces in many war zones. He once downed a bottle of whiskey to avoid freezing on a subzero flight through a blizzard to find Yasir Arafat.

“We had a choice,” he told Mr. Arafat, the teetotaling leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization, after Mr. Urquhart’s small, ice-encrusted plane landed in Beirut in 1982, “of arriving either drunk or dead.”

Resourceful, irreverent, unflappable, Mr. Urquhart blended the qualities of a globe-trotting adventurer and a determined international civil servant. In 1945, he worked for the commission that set up the United Nations Secretariat, arranged the General Assembly’s first meeting in London and settled on New York City as the United Nations’ permanent home.

Over the ensuing decades, he was a close adviser to the first five secretaries general: Trygve Lie of Norway, Dag Hammarskjöld of Sweden, U Thant of what was then Burma, Kurt Waldheim of Austria and Javier Pérez de Cuéllar of Peru (who died in March).

He served 12 years as the U.N.’s No. 2 official, succeeding Ralph J. Bunche as under secretary general for political affairs in 1974, after two years as assistant secretary general. He wrote books on United Nations leaders and operations and was named a knight commander by Queen Elizabeth II in June 1986.



Mr. Urquhart in 1988. He blended the qualities of a globe-trotting adventurer and a determined international civil servant. Yvonne Hemsey/Getty Images

While peacekeeping was not originally envisioned for the United Nations, Mr. Urquhart, as deputy to Dr. Bunche, the American who won the Nobel Peace Prize for mediation of the 1948 war in the Middle East, firmly believed in the U.N. as an arbiter of international disputes. He was instrumental in creating its peacekeeping forces, calling them an army without an enemy — only difficult clients.

It was Mr. Urquhart who decided that U.N. troops should wear blue helmets to distinguish them from actual combatants, and he articulated the principles of their peacekeeping operations, saying they should enter a war zone only with broad political support and a mandate to remain above the conflict, to use force only as a last resort and ultimately to end hostilities and facilitate negotiations.

In a postwar era rife with revolutions, regional disputes and Cold War conflicts, darkened by fears of an East-West nuclear conflagration, Mr. Urquhart deployed and often led his lightly armed peacekeepers into war zones in the Middle East, Congo, southern Africa, Kashmir, Cyprus and other places. They sometimes failed to defuse explosive situations, but often succeeded in easing tensions and assisting refugees.

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“The United Nations may have been shoved to the sidelines long ago when it came to the political ordering of the world,” Madeleine G. Kalb wrote in a New York Times Magazine profile of Mr. Urquhart in 1982. “Yet the United Nations has undeniably chalked up one proud success — peacekeeping in conflicts where the vital interests of the great powers were not directly involved.”

As the crisis negotiator in shooting wars, he was often in danger. In Congo in 1961, trying to subdue a secessionist Katanga Province, he was kidnapped, held for hours and stomped and beaten with rifles by rebel troops, until Katanga's president, Moise Tshombe, intervened to save his life.

By 1986, when Mr. Urquhart retired, he had directed 13 peacekeeping operations, recruited a force of 10,000 troops from 23 countries and established peacekeeping as one of the United Nations' most visible and politically popular functions. In an editorial, The New York Times hailed him as a visionary soldier of peace.

“Mr. Urquhart persists in believing that the Soviet Union and the United States may yet find it in their interest to join in peacekeeping operations that can contain local conflicts,” the editorial said. “As Mr. Urquhart asks in reflecting upon his life's service, ‘Why should not the lion sometimes lie down with the lion, instead of terrifying all the lambs by their mutual hostility?’”

The U.N. peacekeeping forces won the 1988 Nobel Peace Prize.

Brian Edward Urquhart was born on Feb. 28, 1919, in the southwest of England, in the town of Bridport, one of two sons of Murray and Bertha (Rendall) Urquhart. His father quit the family when he was 7. His mother taught at Badminton School in Bristol and, with his brother Andrew at school elsewhere, she enrolled Brian as the only boy among 200 girls there. One of his classmates was Indira Nehru, who became Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India.

He graduated from Westminster School in London in 1937. After two years at Oxford University, he joined the British Army when World War II began in 1939. During training camp in 1942, his parachute partly failed in the last moments of a jump; he recalled looking up at its “tulip shape” as he plunged into a plowed field. Severely injured, he was told he might never walk again. But within a year he had rejoined his unit and saw action in North Africa and Sicily.

In 1944, as a senior intelligence officer, Mr. Urquhart unsuccessfully opposed Operation Market Garden, an ill-advised airborne assault to seize bridges over the Rhine. Its failure cost 17,000 Allied casualties. The episode was chronicled in a 1974 Cornelius Ryan book, “A Bridge Too Far,” and in a 1977 Richard Attenborough film of the same name. Late in the war, searching for German atomic research sites, Mr. Urquhart stumbled upon the horrors of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

His marriage in 1944 to Alfreda Huntington ended in divorce. They had three children, Thomas, Katharine and Robert. He married Sidney Howard Canfield in 1963, and they had two children, Rachel and Charles. Mrs. Urquhart, who had been in hospice care, died on Sunday at 87.

Mr. Urquhart is survived by his five children; a stepson, Thomas Canfield; and by 14 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

Discharged as a major in 1945, Mr. Urquhart went to work in London with Gladwyn Jebb, who was director of the commission that planned the U.N. Secretariat, the civil service that would eventually carry out much of the U.N.'s work from the familiar glass skyscraper on the East River. When the Secretariat was organized in 1946, Mr. Urquhart moved to New York and became chief assistant to Secretary General Trygve Lie.

Peacekeepers were first formally deployed in the Suez Crisis of 1956, when Israel invaded Egypt and Britain and France intervened. They helped to end Katanga's secession from Congo in 1963. They were posted to quell conflicts between Greek and Turkish Cypriots in 1964 and Indian and Pakistani forces in Kashmir in 1965. They were sent into the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights in 1972, and then into southern Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 to buffer Israeli-Palestinian confrontations.

After retiring, Mr. Urquhart joined the Ford Foundation and wrote books and frequent commentaries for The New York Review of Books, The Times and other publications. He lived in Manhattan and Tyngham, Mass.

His books include "Ralph Bunche: An American Life" (1993), "Hammarskjöld" (1972) and an autobiography, "A Life in Peace and War" (1987).

Robert D. McFadden is a senior writer on the Obituaries desk and the winner of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for spot news reporting. He joined The Times in May 1961 and is also the co-author of two books.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section D, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: Brian Urquhart, 101, Troubleshooting Envoy For the U.N., Is Dead