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Sir Brian Urquhart: A most worthwhile life in peace and war

by Peter Langille

Sir Brian Urquhart who died January 2 2021, just weeks before his 102nd birthday, left much to remember as a thoughtful soldier, an exemplary international civil servant, a brilliant scholar and a champion of peace.

He was internationally recognized as a key advisor to UN Secretary-Generals; a calm arbitrator of crucial conflicts that had the potential to go nuclear; a pioneer of UN peacekeeping, and as a stellar UN Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs.

Nothing was gifted — Brian took his share of hard knocks. While a British paratrooper and intelligence officer in WWII, and his parachute didn't open, Brian pounded into a tree (coincidentally in front of General Dwight Eisenhower). He was hospitalized for six months. During the ill-fated "Operation Market Garden" he tried to issue a warning to senior commanders, but failed to stop the massacre and capture of thousands of his colleagues. Yet he was clearly not the sort of person to stay down. He went on to help liberate the Bergen-Belsen death camp and personally captured the 'Beast of Belsen', Josef Kramer.

After the war, Brian Urquhart advised Sir Gladwyn Jebb on British plans for the UN, then served as personal assistant to the first UN Secretary-General, Trygve Lie. After the horrors of war, to work for peace, was in his words, “a dream fulfilled.”

Urquhart inherited from his mother high principles about what was “worthwhile.” He cared little for fashion and the lifestyle of success; to get to his apartment one had to side-step through a human hair snip-shop.

Brian was an idealist. In his words, “I think idealism is the only form of realism because unless you’re idealistic to some extent, you don’t have anything to look forward to, you don’t have anywhere to go. And I think there’s no point in being pessimistic. After all, we’re only on this world once as far as we know. You might as well make the best of it.”

Brian considered the UN’s crucial role was to intervene to stop wars — it was an ongoing “experiment in progress.”

Along with his mentors Ralph Bunche and Dag Hammarskjold, he directed the first attempt at UN peacekeeping in the Suez crisis, followed by an awkwardly challenging operation in the Congo. As a UN Under-Secretary General for 17 years, he oversaw missions in the Middle East, Cyprus, Namibia, Lebanon and Kashmir.

This was new ground and Brian conceded, “we had to make it up as we went along.” For him, the purpose of peacekeeping was to prevent war, de-escalate conflict and protect the vulnerable. Further fighting and any unwarranted use of force were, in his view, deeply regrettable.

Aside from his pivotal role in peace operations, he was a straight-talking mediator and negotiator who led discussions on the peaceful uses of atomic energy and the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

More than a few observers described Urquhart as “the heart of the UN.” Yet he did not shy away from constructive criticism of the UN system’s failings. His response was blistering when confronted by Member States who only offered lofty rhetoric but were reluctant to reform or help on the ground.

Frequently, Brian was pressured to explain that the UN had no standing army and no substantive reserve funds available in emergencies. The UN’s lack of a rapid

deployment capacity to enforce international law continued to rankle – he revitalized Secretary-General Trygve Lie’s original idea of a UN volunteer legion. An earlier review of this work noted that, “His [Urquhart’s] pieces on the UN volunteer force and the responsibilities of the UN system published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1993 and 1994 have set the terms of the debate for all future discussions of rethinking the UN system.”

In the mid-1990s Brian agreed to co-chair the Canadian study, *Towards A Rapid Reaction*

Capability For the United Nations, submitted to the UN General Assembly on its fiftieth anniversary in 1995. He was adamant that a new approach had to be tried. Building on the Canadian proposal, Brian advocated for a UN Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS), and helped to develop detailed plans for the new service. He seldom missed a chance to champion the idea.

Addressing King’s College, he explained: “I am convinced that the UN, if it is to be taken seriously in the peace and security field, has to have some capacity to act effectively on the ground within 24 to 48 hours of a decision by the Security Council. Every year provides examples of what happens when it can’t do that,” and until it can, “...the UN is not going to work very well.”

Canada was one country that Brian respected sufficiently to write: “it has stood with the organization in good times and in bad. It also has a tradition of encouraging new ideas and new thinking about international affairs. Not many countries do this.”

It would have pained him to see successive Conservative and Liberal governments drop the UN ball in the ensuing period, especially with hollow claims of “being back”.

The leadership that Canadian, David Malone, brought to the New York based International Peace Institute prompted Brian to lend his name to what’s now their “Brian Urquhart Center for Peace Operations.” The IPI faces a tall order to live up to his expectations.

In 1986, Brian Urquhart officially retired from the UN although he remained an unofficial senior advisor and continued to encourage substantive reforms for global governance.

Urquhart's first book, *A Life At Peace and War*, offers an insider's perspective of the UN system — and makes wonderful reading.

He also wrote two acclaimed biographies: the first, *Hammarskjold*, detailing his preferred Secretary-General's dynamic, principled diplomacy; and a second on Ralph Bunche: *An American Odyssey*, about his colleague who found peaceful solutions to near-hopeless conflicts (which won Bunche a Nobel Peace Prize in 1950). While at the Ford Foundation, Brian co-authored with Erskine Childers three books on reforming the UN's leadership, its administration, its financing and the need for a more coherent organization of the myriad UN development agencies.

Celebrating Brian's 100th birthday, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was succinct: "...we are grateful for his brilliant and incomparable contributions as a stalwart servant of we the peoples."

Recognizing humanity's survival challenges, Brian suggested:

The urgent necessity is to give serious thought to the problems of the future, to support constructive change, and to try to make the UN system better able to deal with the new dangers that we will soon have to face. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the reasonable survival of the human race on this planet cannot be taken for granted if, for lack of governmental vision and massive public support, this effort does not succeed.

Sir Brian Urquhart wouldn't hesitate in encouraging people everywhere to pull together and aim higher. His unique spirit, inspiration and ideas will continue to clarify what's most "worthwhile."

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