

OBITUARY: From The Times, 15th October 2024

General Sir Mike Jackson obituary, high-profile British army head

British general who refused to ‘start World War Three’ for his American counterpart in Kosovo and later became chief of the general staff



General Sir Mike Jackson told his American counterpart Wesley Clark that seizing Pristina airport and directly confronting Russia was out of their mandate

Photograph: LEON NEAL

It is a rare thing for a general to refuse to obey an order, and rarer still to survive with reputation enhanced. In June 1999, Mike Jackson was in command of KFOR, the 40,000-strong Nato multinational force assembled in Macedonia to implement the peace agreement in neighbouring Kosovo. It was a job requiring a careful blend of subtlety and menace. Jackson’s face and voice were priceless assets.

“His grizzled visage could easily be mistaken for a contour map of the Kosovan mountains”, wrote one reporter. His gravel voice, scarified by years of whisky and cheroots, could cut through conversation like the sudden rev of a Norton Commando. Tall, slim and dark-browed, with the suggestion of a stoop that might presage an uppercut, Jackson stood in marked contrast with his Nato superior, the slightly younger, fine-featured, 5ft 9in former Oxford Rhodes scholar Wesley Clark, a US general. Both men had distinguished service records and experience of the Balkans, but in the case of Kosovo, it would be Jackson’s call that prevailed.

In the break-up of communist former Yugoslavia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ethnic Albanians who made up 90 per cent of the population of Kosovo had grown increasingly resistant to rule from the Serbian capital, Belgrade. The so-called Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began mounting attacks on Serbian security forces, which responded with repression of the population as a whole — “ethnic cleansing”.



Jackson with the late Queen at the official opening of the General's Corps Museum in 2003. He was the highest-profile chief of the general staff since Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery

Photograph: ALAMY

UN resolutions failed to halt the fighting. In March 1999 Nato began a strategic bombing campaign to force the Serbs to withdraw, while at the same time assembling a force to

occupy Kosovo after the withdrawal or, crucially, to threaten invasion. Eventually, in response to a UN resolution, Serbia's President Milosevic agreed to leave and to the deployment of Jackson's KFOR to "secure and enforce the withdrawal of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia forces from Kosovo". Russian pressure on Milosevic had undoubtedly played a part, as indeed had Russian reassurance, with President Yeltsin telling Nato that he wished to assist KFOR with the presence of Russian troops.

Just as Jackson was about to launch his KFOR units, a Russian armoured column with "KFOR" painted on the sides of the vehicles crossed the border into Serbia from neighbouring Bosnia and began making for the airport at Pristina, the Kosovan capital. The object, evidently, was to secure the airport in order to fly in more troops from Russia. Indeed, reports of aircraft movement in Russia had reached Clark, Nato's supreme allied commander Europe (Saceur), at his headquarters in Belgium.

Clark flew to Macedonia to talk to Jackson. First he told him that he wanted a force flown forward by helicopter to secure the airport before the Russians arrived. Jackson persuaded him that with Serbian air defences still active and unpredictable it was simply too dangerous. Next he told Jackson to send an armoured force to block the runway physically. As this force would have arrived after the Russians, the possibilities for "kinetic confrontation" were obvious. Accounts differ, but Clark has not directly challenged the version in Jackson's autobiography *Soldier* (2007), in which Jackson says he closed the door of his office so that it was just the two of them, and said: "Sir, I'm not going to start World War Three for you."

Clark — a four-star (that is, full) general who had passed out top from West Point and also from the US command and staff college where his thesis on "applying force swiftly to achieve escalation dominance" had proved influential in future policy — insisted that he had the authority and repeated the order. Jackson replied: "Sir, I'm a three-star general, you can't give me orders like this. I have my own judgment of the situation and I believe that this order is outside our mandate."



Jackson was appointed chief of the general staff in 2003. He was critical of officers who failed to maintain discipline during the invasion of Iraq, which took place under his watch

Photograph: REX

The political implications of Jackson's resigning his command, which he told the chief of the defence staff in London that he was prepared to do, or of Clark's sacking him, which was theoretically possible, were in the end too sobering, not least as the telephone lines between London and Washington had become hot. Besides, if the Russians wanted to fly in troops, all they had to do was use airfields in Serbia — if, that is, the countries in between would open their airspace. Jackson said he would order his British contingent to encircle the airfield instead, and talk with the Russian commander himself.

Clark relented for the time being, and Jackson flew to Pristina once the advance elements of KFOR had reached the airport. There in pouring rain he met the commander

of the Russian column, General Viktor Zavarzin, greeting him in Russian. Zavarzin was frosty, but Jackson continued: "I used to get wet as a company commander, but generals don't need to get wet." They found a dry place in what remained of the wrecked airport terminal and Jackson took out a flask of whisky from his map pocket. Relations warmed up after that.

Clark was still not happy, continuing to press for the blocking of the runway. On the third day, when Jackson met Zavarzin again — who now offered reciprocal vodka — the Russian complained that KLA snipers were harassing his men. Jackson seized the opportunity to offer to place a cordon round the airfield, and in rusty but effective Russian added: "Furthermore, this force of British soldiers will be commanded by my own son." (Mark Jackson was commanding 1 Para's elite pathfinder platoon). Zavarzin beamed and gave Jackson a bear hug. The crisis had passed. "The Russians are a very sentimental people," Jackson wrote. And, he might have added, their army in those days had honour. An agreement was signed for the Russians to be integrated into peacekeeping duties while remaining outside Nato command.

Jackson had known he had a strong hand of cards in his dispute with Clark, not least "top cover" in London. Clark did not enjoy the same support in Washington, although Republican senator John Warner, chair of the Senate armed services committee, would later accuse Jackson of insubordination. Jackson was following custom too, and knew it. When after the debacle of the charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War, Lord Lucan, the divisional commander, had protested against the commander-in-chief's reprimand, Lord Raglan replied: "You were a lieutenant general and should therefore have exercised your discretion, and, not approving of the charge, should not have caused it to be made." Right decision or not, Jackson's was the result of his professionalism, not stubbornness, and he had displayed uncommon moral courage.

Michael David (Mike) Jackson, known in the army, and by himself, as "Jacko", was born at his mother's house in Sheffield in 1944. His father had served in the ranks of the (horsed) Household Cavalry and then received a wartime commission in the Royal Army Service Corps (by degrees, today the Royal Logistic Corps), and would see action on D-Day. His mother was a curator at Sheffield City Museum.

At eight, Jackson went to board at the preparatory department of Stamford School in Lincolnshire, and at 13 to the senior school. At Stamford in the 1950s, he said, "being Sir Malcolm Sargent's old school, it was either the corps [cadet force] or music". Jackson being no musician — although he did "a bit of choral singing" — with a serving officer father it was therefore the corps. By his own admission he was no scholar either, but he was good at languages, and Stamford, unusually, offered Russian.



Jackson with his second wife, Sarah. They married in 1985

Photograph: JEFF GILBERT/REX

He took Russian, French and German at A-level, but decided to go straight to the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, rather than university. At the end of the two-year course, he was one of his intake's six junior under officers ("prefects"), and passed out fifth overall. Curiously, though, he chose to be commissioned in the Intelligence Corps, believing it would be the best use of his languages, and with the promise of an in-service degree. His grades were not up to Oxbridge, however, and not many universities offered Russian. Birmingham did as part of its Russian studies degree. So rather than an ivy-clad quad, he lived in digs in Edgbaston for the next three years.

The Intelligence Corps required an officer to complete a year's attachment in the infantry before proceeding to specialise. Jackson chose the Parachute Regiment. His company commander was Major (later [Lieutenant General Sir Michael Gray](#)), a Para legend. In later years, Gray recalled Jackson as "a mature young man full of confidence, eager to learn, very ambitious but very pleasant with it ... a no-nonsense subaltern, married when he arrived with me." He persuaded him to transfer, telling him that if he stayed in the Intelligence Corps his ceiling would be brigadier.

It was unusual for a subaltern to be married, but while at Birmingham, Jackson had met Jennifer Savery. The marriage broke down in the late 1970s, however, and they divorced, but they remarried in 1982. This reconciliation was ultimately dissolved too, and in 1985

Jackson married Sarah Coombe, a sapper officer's daughter who worked in publishing. Lady Jackson survives him along with their son, Tom, a director of the interior design company Jamb, and two children of the first marriage: Amanda; and Mark, who was forced to leave the army after a parachuting accident, became a sculptor and works in security.

Within two years of formally transferring, Jackson was adjutant of the first battalion (1 Para) in Northern Ireland, and therefore the commanding officer's right-hand man in Londonderry on January 30, 1972. What exactly happened that day — “Bloody Sunday” — was the subject of the [longest-running judicial inquiry](#) in history. “The facts that are undisputed are well known,” the prime minister, Tony Blair, told parliament when announcing the inquiry by Lord Justice Saville almost 26 years to the day after the event.

During a disturbance in Londonderry after a civil rights march, shots were fired by 1 Para. Thirteen people were killed and another 13 wounded, one of whom subsequently died. Edward Heath, the prime minister at the time, set up a public inquiry under the lord chief justice, Lord Widgery. The inquiry promptly concluded that shots had been fired at the soldiers before they started the firing that led to the casualties and that, for the most part, the soldiers acted as they did because they thought their standing orders justified it, and that although there was no proof that any of the deceased had been shot while handling a firearm or bomb, there was a strong suspicion that some had been firing weapons or handling bombs in the course of the afternoon. Blair went on to say that new material had since come to light, including ballistic and medical evidence.

In his autobiography, Jackson wrote of “a confused situation” that day, and that in the early evening, back in the disused factory that was their base for the operation, “it was becoming clear that there had been a large number of fatalities”. Jackson had been with the commanding officer, Derek Wilford ([obituary, November 27, 2023](#)), on the streets and had heard shots fired at the Paras before they themselves opened fire. Nevertheless he “was left with some very mixed and worrying feelings. I imagine that others in the Battalion felt the same. I hated the thought, as some commentators would state straight away, that our soldiers might have lost control. It would be very unprofessional to have done that ... I knew these men, and I knew their quality. So far as I was concerned the Paras were tough, but they were disciplined. I found it difficult to accept that there could have been any mass breach of discipline ... The question remains whether the response of some of our soldiers was proportionate or not, considering the nature of the threat.”

When the Saville report, far more critical than Widgery, was published in 2010, Blair apologised publicly to the relatives of those killed and wounded. Jackson added, “The prime minister made a fulsome apology and I join him in so doing.”

After attending the staff college at Camberley in 1976, Jackson became brigade major (chief of staff) in Berlin before returning to Northern Ireland as a company commander

with 2 Para in South Armagh, “Bandit Country”. Command of 1 Para came in 1984 in Allied Command Europe’s (ACE) immediate reaction force. For reasons not entirely clear, his soldiers took to wearing T-shirts proudly emblazoned with “I serve the Prince of Darkness”. The padre was dismayed. There was a conversation behind closed doors which Jackson never disclosed and which the padre couldn’t. The T-shirts disappeared.

After 1 Para, although promoted to full colonel, Jackson believed he was passed over for brigade command and contemplated leaving. He was persuaded to hang on, and the following year attended the higher command and staff course (HCSC), on which he shone, even in the company of a number of bright stars. He was selected for command of 39 Infantry Brigade in Belfast, and in the gap between HCSC and Belfast took up a six-month defence fellowship at Cambridge. It was, he wrote, “a summer of bow ties, bicycles and boats ... and a baby”. Or rather, of conception: the baby was born the following year under heavy guard at the Royal Victoria Hospital just off the Falls Road, a strongly nationalist area.

The early 1990s in the province was the time when both sides were seeking to set up “talks about talks” to find a way forward without losing political credibility. The task of the security forces, in Belfast especially, was to keep as low a profile as possible while supporting the police. One brigade commander in the province was removed for judging the challenge badly. Jackson, the supreme pragmatist, judged it perfectly.

Unusually accelerated promotion to major general followed, and in 1994, with Nato increasingly drawn in to the Balkans, Jackson was given command of the 3rd Division, which the following year formed the basis of the Multi-National Division South-West in IFOR, the Implementation Force which would oversee the ceasefire and reconstruction of civil-war-shattered Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Shrewd, patient, forceful but politically aware, Jackson was notably adroit in managing the assorted national contingents whose capability and resolve varied markedly, and in circumstances that sceptics said was impossible. He held his nose in order to meet General Ratko Mladic, head of the Serbian army, “a brutal, boastful, and manipulative thug”, he wrote, and managed not to smile for the cameras over their lunch of burger and beans, a mistake that Wesley Clark had made earlier (even exchanging caps for the photograph) which had played badly in Washington.

Jackson’s success in Bosnia brought him promotion to “three-star” (lieutenant general) in 1997 and command of the ACE Rapid Reaction Corps, which would become the kernel of KFOR two years later.

Jackson was rewarded with a DSO (Companion of the Distinguished Service Order) for his “highly successful command and leadership during active operations” in Kosovo, and a fourth star to become commander-in-chief, United Kingdom Land Command. “Land” ran the army day-to-day, everything from dealing with foot and mouth disease to

hostage rescue in Sierra Leone. Jackson had an outstanding staff: he spent as little time in his office as possible.

Then in 2003 he was appointed chief of the general staff (CGS), the army's summit. The prospect of another three years in uniform — or rather, a suit, the MoD being primarily a ministry not a headquarters — pleased him enormously, despite ever-diminishing resources with which to deliver (a word he hated: “postmen deliver”, he once growled at a civil servant who told a reporter “it’s about delivery”).

In the aftermath of 9/11 had come the Afghanistan intervention, and then on his watch as CGS the invasion of Iraq and subsequent insurgency. In the run-up to war, Jackson warned that realistic post-conflict planning in Washington appeared to be non-existent. Nevertheless, in the chaos that followed the toppling of Saddam Hussein he was tough on officers who failed to maintain discipline, conscious perhaps of his own experience in Northern Ireland. His bluntness was fabled, and often withered hardened reporters. On *Channel 4 News*, in the aftermath of the deaths in custody of several Iraqi men and the court-martialing of commanders, his interviewer suggested he might be being unreasonable. “What?” he scoffed. “You think officers should have a bye in this?”

One of the least kinetic but controversial difficulties he chose to grapple with was infantry re-organisation. To save money, and arguably to mitigate loss of expertise as well as unit unavailability, the system of moving entire battalions from one base and role to another, usually every four years, “the arms plot”, was abandoned. Instead, individual regiments were merged into multibattalion regiments within which officers and men could be more readily moved between roles and locations — “trickle posting”. Many famous regimental names disappeared in the “Jackson reforms”, and with them, some argue — and with cause — recruiting, retention and cohesion as well as the dynamic change created by the move of location and role. It was the Parachute Regiment model, but not a size that easily fitted all. One retired officer wrote in *The Independent*: “350 years of history junked at a stroke.” Opinions vary hotly still.

A happier, if tricky, problem was what to do with Princes William and Harry when they left Sandhurst. Naturally, like everyone else, they would want to go to Iraq and Afghanistan. Jackson “considered the methodology of reaching a decision” for when the time came. He revealed in a television documentary in 2023 that the late Queen Elizabeth told him: “My grandsons have taken my shilling, therefore they must do their duty.”

In 2006, at the age of 62, Jackson finally left the service. At another time, although nudging the upper age limit, he might have become chief of the defence staff — his weather-beaten face and low rumble of a voice belied a modern man with much mileage still in the tank — but the army had had a good run of men in that post in late years, and there was a strong RAF contender. He applied instead to be governor of the

Royal Hospital Chelsea, but to his dismay was gazumped by an even more senior retired person. The job might not have been entirely felicitous, though, for in one sense the years had taken a toll on Jackson's affability.

Even the "old and bold" of the Parachute Regiment, of which he had lately been commandant, reportedly found him distant, sometimes abrupt. Sir Mike Gray, a previous colonel commandant, thought he had become a touch arrogant. He famously fell out with Clarissa Dickson Wright at the Althorp Literary Festival, not a difficult thing to do, but an unwise one over, among other things, the reorganisation of the Scottish infantry. He was always conscious, and much regretted, that he had never been in the sort of battle that his peers had fought in the Falklands. He had seen and done too much, however, to have much patience with those he thought knew nothing of the complexities he had faced.

He gave the BBC Richard Dimbleby Lecture shortly after retiring, concluding with the barbed comment: "It is indeed a great support to hear the prime minister [Blair] say that 'the army can have everything it needs': I await with interest the manifestation of that fine sentiment." Some thought it apologia, but he was certainly no showman. He was, though, conscious of his appearance — some said "vain" (easily confused with soldierly pride). He famously had the bags under his eyes — "suitcases" were a more appropriate description, thought one journalist — surgically removed, claiming it "a matter of vision, not vanity", as the bags were impairing his sight. He had no affectation, however: his charisma was entirely natural, and he had a good heart.

He acquired a few directorships, did the odd lecture here and there, and took part in the BBC series *Rise of the Nazis* — growling ominously and authoritatively, if not exactly originally — but he never really found a proper role. A peerage would have given him a serious platform on which to speak about defence, rather than the "armchair", but peerages for former service chiefs, as opposed to chiefs of defence staff, came only with political strings attached.

He listed his recreations as travel, music, skiing and tennis, but might have added "family" (and whisky).

He was the highest-profile CGS since Montgomery, and one of the last of the big beasts.

General Sir Mike Jackson GCB CBE DSO DL, former chief of the General Staff, was born on March 21, 1944. He died of prostate cancer on October 15, 2024, aged 80