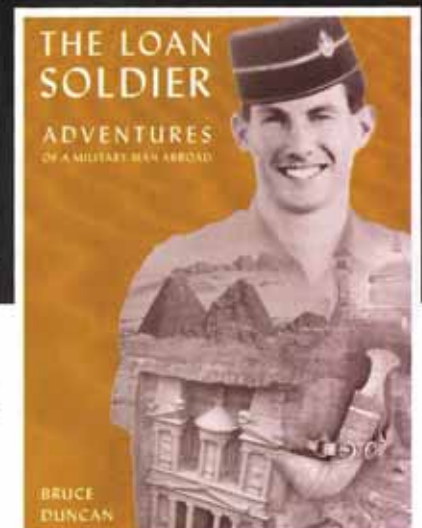


*Bruce Duncan*  
 Photograph: Ed Nix

# A life in uniform

Bruce Duncan was intrinsically drawn towards a life in the British Army's overseas loan service. This transpired to be an ideal career choice if you crave travel, adventure and being kidnapped at bayonet point, writes **Richard O Smith**



**A**fter the Second World War Britain began shedding much of its former empire. However, as Oxfordshire resident Duncan explained: "When British forces withdrew from newly independent overseas garrisons, some countries still wanted our military presence to offer advice and training."

This led to an initial posting to Brunei in 1964. Aged 23, he was surprised to be placed on operational service as a uniformed British officer involved in the Borneo Confrontation – a full-scale war in everything but formal declaration. He was even more surprised to be appointed as the Sultan of Brunei's head of security and personal bodyguard.

Often described as one of the world's richest men, the Sultan once travelled with his limousined entourage to the rural

Oxfordshire village of Taston for a cream tea with Duncan's parents "to experience a typical, normal English family".

The problem being, Duncan's life has been anything but typical or normal. This is repeatedly proved in his just published autobiography *The Loan Soldier*.

Over the ensuing decades Duncan found himself donning a British Army uniform on active service in Brunei, Sudan, Nigeria, Oman, Jordan and Kuwait. And Sutton Coldfield. Needless to say, given his proclivity for operating in dangerous parts of the globe, he was the target of a suspected bomb attack in one of these locations – Sutton Coldfield.

A career previously notable for its fortuitous timings, ended joltingly when he was asked to move to Kuwait. Just before August 2, 1990. A tumultuous date in world history when Saddam Hussein's tanks rumbled into peaceful Kuwait while the world was caught off-guard by the brutal scale of the unanticipated Iraqi

invasion. It was a horrifically violent ending to a career that had started out so peacefully.

Born in India as the son of a colonial tea planter, Duncan was shipped to the Old Country for schooling in 1953. Forewarning him of his upcoming fate, a friend had presciently gifted him a copy of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* to read on the lengthy journey to England, although Duncan admits his upbringing in India's jungled hills was far more *Jungle Book* than *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. And his plan was always to return to India and follow in his father's plantation business – it was written in the tea leaves!

Alas this plan was scuppered like a vessel in sight of harbour when India passed a law banning the employment of foreign labour in tea plantations days before he was due to return. Left at an employment loose end, Duncan's parents utilised a family

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connection to ensure their son enrolled on an engineering apprenticeship in Gainsborough.

This unremarkable North Lincolnshire town was to shape the outcome of his life – not due to any learned engineering skills, but because it was here he joined the local Territorial Army.

Soon he had enlisted into the Royal Tank Regiment. Three years later he passed out of Sandhurst and his new officer status ensured a commission in the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment. He was posted to Germany at a time when the Cold War was at its coldest with the building of the Berlin Wall.

Then it was back to Blighty and a posting in the Training Regiment, initiating countless recruits on the moors outside Catterick on perennial training exercises. Here a charismatic captain regaled the officer's mess each evening with tales of an army career spent in Arabia and other equally exotic postings. Soon afterwards an adventure-seeking Duncan enlisted in the overseas loan service and found himself landing in both Borneo and in immediate danger.

Borneo was then a British protectorate and Brunei had opted not to join Malaysia; plus the creation of the latter was objectionable to Indonesia. This caused border tensions and incursions throughout an unofficial war that somehow escaped official pronouncement. Furthermore, as a 23 year-old just out of Sandhurst, Duncan arrived to be briefed that his unit had likely been infiltrated by enemy recruits.

"I was appointed commander and had to take a company out on active service controlling land, air and naval capabilities – according to *Soldier Magazine* we were the only regiment in the world with these three capabilities," he informs me.

His book is particularly rich in describing how a soldier with no experience of jungle combat (they did not have much of a training facility for that in Catterick) created a disciplined army by empowering, not repressing, the locals. In return they taught him how to march silently through the jungle and decipher the animal and bird calls to discover your enemy's location.

Duncan recounts how, as a relatively inexperienced overseas soldier, he became the *aide de camp* for the Sultan of Brunei. He arrives to discover the Sultan's palace

*The Sultan of Brunei with bodyguard Bruce Duncan*



*Bruce Duncan with the Sultan of Brunei*

teeming with sightseers, well-wishers and grudge bearers – and anyone else who fancied popping into the palace for a photo-opportunity with the Sultan. While the Sultan's access to his public was laudable, his security was laughable – a situation Duncan immediately remedied.

Accompanying the Sultan on a UK trip for invited talks with the British government sparked a diplomatic incident. The UK authorities were insistent that Duncan was not permitted to pack a loaded pistol whilst protecting the Sultan.

Eventually an offer of compromise was accepted with the following sinister caveat: "As I was a professional soldier who could be trusted with a firearm, it was agreed that I could carry a weapon provided that it was kept out of sight.

"Moreover I was authorised only to use it as a very last resort to save the sultan's life. Under no circumstances could I use it to save my own life," before concluding

matter-of-factly, "this seemed entirely reasonable to me." While in London he was tasked with sourcing a black taxi cab that the Sultan enjoyed driving anonymously around Brunei past bemused locals.

Meeting his future wife Toni he still required – aged 28 – permission from his commanding officer to marry! Presumably Toni knew what she was getting involved with. Soon they were making home in the stifling heat of Sudan. Arriving at Duncan's new family home, his predecessor dismisses raw sewage running down the stairs as "a minor inconvenience".

Later in Sudan he encounters Captain Hitler (the unfortunately named captain had a brother named Mussolini – showing his parents rather backed the wrong side in the Second World War) – a Kurtz-like figure who ran a motivated and disciplined

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*Bruce Duncan commanded this platoon in the Sudan in the 1960s*

*Bruce Duncan pictured meeting Lady Diana in Kuwait*



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squadron in spite of being unpaid and unacknowledged by their HQ in Khartoum.

When Duncan saves his own son's life by challenging the hospital's false diagnosis of malaria and insisting correctly he is treated for heat stroke instead, it appears almost a typical day in Sudan. Unsurprisingly, returning to the domesticity of suburban Sutton Coldfield afterwards proves to be an uncomfortable fit. Only once - when a suspected IRA parcel bomb arrives specifically addressed to him - does his adventure antenna twitch.

Then it is on to Nigeria where he endures the horror of discovering 12 of his training recruits shot by a Nigerian firing squad in a country where venality appears commonplace. Thereafter he changes continents again, gaining a relatively peaceful year in Oman before arriving at a fateful period of history in Kuwait.

Based just outside Kuwait City in a strategically important position near the country's main port, his brief was to provide training and technical assistance to the Kuwaiti army and air force. Here he encountered a bewildering class hierarchy where privileges were accorded to class stratification.

"Kuwait was the only place in my career where I felt worked for," he said. He travelled to the region soon after the end of the bloody eight year Iran/Iraq war - a conflict he describes with some

justification as the most violent hostility since the Second World War.

Duncan's arrival in Kuwait replicates a famous episode of *Yes Minister* when he is expected to provide alcohol to diplomatic and embassy guests in this notoriously dry abode.

Fortunately local shops obliged, selling gin labelled as "computer cleaning fluid". But the partying came to an abrupt end when his telephone rang worryingly early during the pre-dawn hours of August 2, 1990. Saddam Hussein had ordered a full invasion of Kuwait.

Tank and small arms fire peppered the sand around his house - an isolated building located entirely in the wrong place during a raging battle for Kuwait's main port. An Iraqi jet released a bomb that exploded feet away. Huddling the children away from the windows, he sought direction from London only to discover the Iraqis had disabled all telephone lines.

Unlike the American contingent in Kuwait, the British had not been afforded any diplomatic status. This now left them in a perilous state. Especially when the Iraqi army arrived the next day and abducted all the British men they could find, leaving the women and children at the hands of the "thoroughly ill-disciplined" Iraqi army.

But as Bruce sagely states: "Diplomatic immunity isn't body armour - it doesn't

stop bullets being fired by trigger happy soldiers."

The decision had early been taken that Duncan, his two daughters and both sons, and more than 20 other UK nationals should go into hiding. Remarkably their cover was blown by the BBC World Service cheerily announcing that Bruce and 30 members of his team were still hiding in Kuwait City after the other British staff had been rounded up by the invading Iraqi army. His wife Toni and daughters were taken away at bayonet point - leaving Bruce unaware of their fate for weeks.

After weeks of fear and uncertainty, it was an Oxford connection that brokered an escape plan. When Dr Blumberg, then Master of Balliol College, heard that another Balliol man - former Prime Minister Edward Heath - was travelling to Baghdad to secure the release of Saddam's British hostages, he suggested Heath intervene to request Duncan's sons Alex and Rorie (Balliol and Teddy Hall undergraduates) were liberated too.

Heath's intervention - branded as a

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"mercy flight" by the media – secured the repatriation of 23 British hostages. Yet only after the Virgin airliner had negotiated a terrifying landing on an unlit runway in a blacked-out city. Alas there were two noticeably empty seats when the returning 747 plane touched down on British soil. Duncan was soon to receive the most chillingly terrible news.

Soon after his sons had phoned to impart the good news they were on route to the airport to reach Edward Heath's plane – a risk given Duncan was still in hiding – he received another telephone call. This time from the British Ambassador who immediately asked, "What is the worst thing you can imagine happening to you?"

Tragically the subsequent information the ambassador imparted was true to its billing. Duncan was informed of the numbing news that his son Alex had died. Furthermore his other son Rorie had been seriously injured. Laying in a hospital ransacked of all medical supplies by the invaders, Iraqi soldiers attempted to extract information on his father's hiding place using techniques tantamount to torture.

Then UK Secretary of State for Defence intervened and ordered Bruce to come out of hiding, relinquish his command and leave the country. But it would be months later before Duncan was able to make it back to Britain. Throughout this time his wife Toni and wounded son Rorie were oblivious to his fate.

Reports subsequently confirmed Alex had been killed in car accident – a combination of reckless driving by ill-disciplined soldiers and the sheer scale of the Iraqi looting of Kuwait City that had included all the city's traffic lights. Alex was just 19.

Remarkably Rorie recovered after months of convalescence and won an

Oxford Blue while reading Arabic. Perhaps even more remarkably, Duncan requested a post back in the Middle East and moved to Jordan to become the Defence Attaché with a remit to re-establish military relations between Jordan and Britain, citing this as: "The only way I was going to get over the trauma of Kuwait and Iraq, I wanted to go back as I didn't want my last impression of the Middle East, a place I love, to be Kuwait."

Here he oversaw a successful reconnection of military relations between Jordan and the UK.

However his reward was to be called into an unremarkable office one day, after orchestrating a boldly historic joint exercise between Jordanian and British forces, and told he was being made redundant. Thankfully his appeal against the redundancy was upheld. But the granted reprieve proved only to be temporary.

A strong sense of duty and dedication pulses throughout his account like currents of electricity powering his motivation. This makes it harder to accept the shocking news of his intended layoff on a day when he had expected the communication to deliver official praise for a job well done. I ask how this made him feel.

"I felt devastated, especially after having made a very good start in my main mission to improve military cooperation between Jordan and Britain. I was still suffering from the effects of the family's experience in Kuwait and my job, particularly doing something positive in the Middle East, was an important factor in keeping me going. I did, however, accept that my selection for redundancy was not personal." He is keen to clarify the Army were procedurally correct and fair throughout.

Alas a far greater tragedy was soon to strike again. News reached him that

his other son Rorie had collapsed while running in the Moscow marathon and died in an Oxford hospital 48 hours later. A memorial bench now stands in Balliol inscribed to the memory of his two deceased sons. Zoe, one of his two daughters, also made it to Oxford, studying at Jesus College. Her doctorate subject was, fittingly enough, *The Crystallization of the Iraqi State* and later published.

*The Loan Soldier* is a story imbued with a sense of duty, covering deepest tragedy and highest success. It captures a period of British military history raging against the dying light as the sun sets on Empire. Yet *The Loan Soldier* is the opposite of jingoism, instead willingly embracing a new world order.

Duncan's affection for his described countries – especially their people and culture – lights his ultimately optimistic prose. Even when branding the Kuwaitis' damagingly hierarchical society "aloof", Duncan points out the life-risking bravery of some Kuwaitis to feed him and his family whilst in hiding. "I had to tell them to stop bringing us food as if discovered we'd be taken by Saddam as hostages – but they would have been shot. No doubt about it."

Charged with overseeing a fragile peace as temporary as the patterns in desert sand, Duncan reminds us that soldiers are not the robotic order-delivering machines politicians and generals sometimes treat them as being. His British stiff upper lip stands to attention whenever duty requires, but understandable human emotions inevitably leak out.

I ask how optimistic he is about the future of the Middle East? And does he feel subsequent UK governments have sufficiently understood the region?

"A widely held popular belief tends to blame the current chaos in the region on the 2003 Gulf War. I do not hold this view, although I do have mixed feelings about this conflict and in particular the 'end game', or rather the lack of it. Another factor is that Western-style democracy doesn't work for every country. In many countries in the Middle East and Africa, a benign dictatorship might work better.

"On Loan Service, for example, I learnt not always to insist on the 'British Way', but to find out the reasons behind doing it 'their way' and then, if valid, maximise the efficiency of their way. Finally, I think the Internet has done much to expose the more sheltered parts of the world to the worst excesses of the West, resulting in a backlash from those with fundamentalist views."

Duncan's is a life well lived. Hopefully *The Loan Soldier* will be a book well read.

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• *The Loan Soldier* (Greenfinch Press, £19.99) is available from [www.greenfinchpress.com](http://www.greenfinchpress.com) in both print and eBook format.



Bruce Duncan pictured meeting President George Bush in The White House