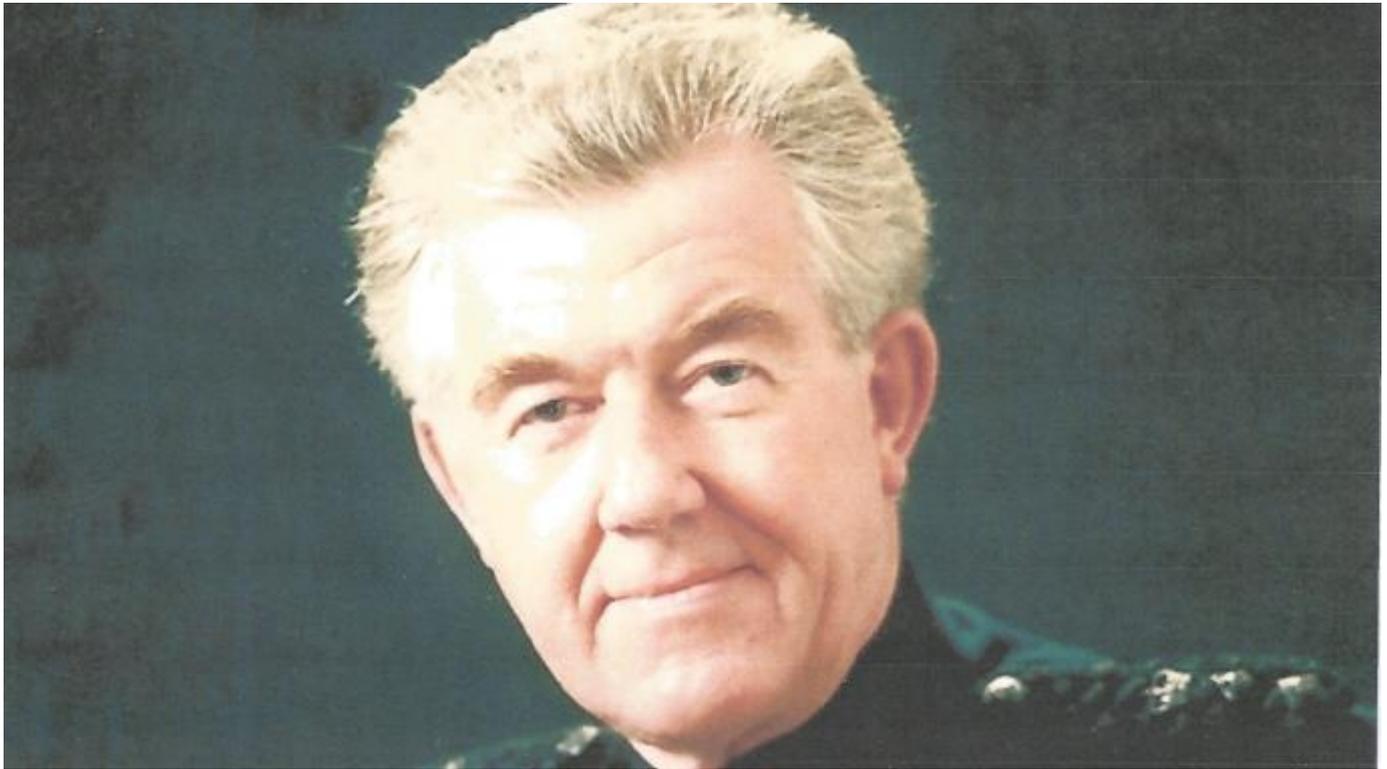


Brigadier Sir Miles Hunt-Davis obituary

Former Gurkha officer who became the Duke of Edinburgh's right-hand man and faced a tough grilling at the inquest of Princess Diana

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Hunt-Davis in 1990 as colonel of the 7th Gurkha Rifles. A year later he left the armed forces and joined the duke's staff

As private secretary to the Duke of Edinburgh, Miles Hunt-Davis was the duke's most loyal and trusted aide. Tall, burly and wearing his hair *en brosse*, he cut the sort of distinguished figure one might expect of a man who had commanded a brigade of Gurkhas, captained a team at the World Elephant Polo Championship and stonewalled the pugnacious Michael Mansfield, QC, when questioned about the duke's relationship with Diana, Princess of Wales, at her inquest in 2007.

Hunt-Davis joined "Team Philip" in 1991 at a time of great industry. Although the duke was 70, he was still carrying out almost 600 official engagements a year; by the time he was 87, and Hunt-Davis was well past retirement age, the number of engagements had dropped, but it was still a very impressive 354, of which 53 were overseas. Day after day the Court Circular in this newspaper outlined the duke's schedule, often with the phrase "Brigadier Miles Hunt-Davis was in attendance".

Cool and measured under pressure, Hunt-Davis also had a firm streak, even with the duke, whose official life was run in an orderly and strategic manner. They travelled everywhere together, often in connection with the duke's presidency of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). "From the middle of Africa in the bush, to Siberia, to the edges of parts of South America," Hunt-Davis said in an interview with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation. Throughout all this he kept his mouth firmly shut, "because there were few things that he had not had practical, personal experience of".

In Robert Hardman's book *Our Queen*, Hunt-Davis recounted how he accompanied the duke on a no-frills WWF trip to northeast Russia: "We were put up in a guest house — I think it was a former gulag — and I came in to find Prince Philip standing on the bowl of the lavatory, fiddling with the cistern and saying: 'There's no water.' "

The most public test of Hunt-Davis's loyalty came at Princess Diana's inquest when Mohamed Al Fayed, whose son Dodi died in the car accident in which the princess was also killed in 1997, tried to blame the duke. Had the duke ever described Dodi as an oily bed-hopper? "It sounds extremely unlikely," the courtier replied. Had he ever heard that Diana feared that the duke wanted her dead? No, he had not. And no, the duke had never discussed Diana's revelations about the royal family in a television interview two years before her death. What about Andrew Morton's 1992 book, *Diana: Her True Story*? "Didn't read it." Did the duke read it? "Never discussed." How close was his relationship with the duke? "As close as a private secretary is to a member of the royal family."

Later Hunt-Davis would recall the inquest as being one of the worst experiences of his life. "I was extremely apprehensive," he said. "Mansfield was not an easy man to face across a courtroom, and did not take prisoners. But all I was doing was speaking the truth."

Miles Garth Hunt-Davis was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1938. His father was Lieutenant-Colonel Eric Hunt-Davis, a Londoner who fought with the Australian army at Gallipoli and settled in the "brave new world" of South Africa. His mother, Mary (née Boyce), was of Scottish descent. They divorced while Miles and his brother, Derek, were young.

He was educated at St Andrew's College in Grahamstown, near Port Elizabeth, recalling that he was not very academic, despite being a prefect. He spent three years as a management trainee with Fry's Metals, the country's leading recycler of lead, of which his stepfather was chairman, and was 20 when its British parent company, Goodlass Wall, transferred him to London. "I lived in a bedsit just off Sloane Square and was paid £10 a week [about £230 today], which was almost nothing even then," he recalled.

To meet people and "make a bit of extra money", Hunt-Davis joined the Territorial Army as a private soldier, proving himself a champion shot. Soon he was commissioned into the Queen's Royal Regiment of the Territorial Army. Enjoying service life, he decided to become a regular officer. "I was too old to go to Sandhurst, so I joined as a three-year officer and I passed out as top cadet of my intake."

He recalled being questioned about his intentions by the officer who ran the training and said that he hoped to return to the Queen's Royal Regiment. "He looked me up and down and said, 'No you're not, you're going to the Gurkhas.' " He joined the 6th Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles in 1962, seeing active service with them in Borneo and Malaysia.

In 1965 Hunt-Davis married Anita Ridsdale, known as Gay, whom he had known since school. She survives him with their daughter, Jo, who teaches English as a foreign language, and two sons, Justin, who is with the Foreign Office, and Ben, who won a gold medal at the Sydney Olympics in 2000 as a member of the Great Britain men's rowing eight and now runs a leadership development company.

In the military field Hunt-Davis attended the Canadian Land Forces Command and Staff College from 1969 to 1970 and in 1971 was promoted to major. In 1974, the year in which he co-wrote a history of the 6th Gurkha Rifles, he was appointed brigade major of the 48th Gurkha Infantry Brigade. A year later they were serving on the 25-mile border between China and Hong Kong,

preventing Chinese immigrants from crossing illegally into what was then a British Crown colony. On the day that the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh were due to arrive for a five-day visit, news reached Hunt-Davis that 2,500 Vietnamese “boat people” were expected on a Dutch container ship that had picked them up from their foundering vessel in the South China Sea. He recalled how his improvised camp for them on the Hong Kong polo ground did not win him many friends, but met the circumstances admirably. The next morning the Gurkhas were on parade for their royal visitors.

He was commander of the British Gurkhas in Nepal when the Queen and the duke visited in 1986. On the last full day of their tour he introduced the Queen to some of her toughest and bravest troops, including five holders of the Victoria Cross, 23 holders of the Military Cross and 20 winners of the Military Medal. “They are incredibly good soldiers,” he told her. “They are tough, loyal, and when it gets going they are extremely ferocious.” While in the country he took up elephant polo, which served as a useful icebreaker when he took up royal duties.

There were postings in Brunei, Britain and back in Hong Kong before his retirement in 1991. At about this time Sir Brian McGrath (obituary, June 9, 2016), the duke’s private secretary at the time of the Nepal visit, was looking for an assistant private secretary and Hunt-Davis’s name was submitted by the defence ministry. He joined the duke’s office two months later. When McGrath retired the next year, Hunt-Davis was promoted to private secretary. Between 2002 and 2010 he was also Prince Philip’s treasurer.

During his royal service there was one small hiccup, which came during the successful campaign led by the actress Joanna Lumley to allow the Gurkhas resettlement rights in Britain. Although the duke and Hunt-Davis kept a low profile, Hunt-Davis’s wife wrote a letter to *The Times* (May 22, 2009) pointing out that allowing Gurkhas to settle en masse in Britain would deprive their homeland of an important resource. Although he agreed with the sentiment, the first Hunt-Davis knew of the letter was when it was discussed on the radio as he lay in bed.

He enjoyed collecting Gurkha medals and was a dab hand at DIY; he learnt bricklaying so he could construct a walled garden. He was an enthusiastic if unaccomplished golfer and, with his dry sense of humour, would sometimes surprise visitors by reverting to the strong accent of his native South Africa.

He was uninterested in hierarchy. As one colleague put it: “Miles did not suffer from red-carpet fever.” The cottage that he and his family once occupied in the grounds of Kensington Palace is now the home of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex.

From his slightly shabby office overlooking the gardens of Buckingham Palace Hunt-Davis could ponder the astonishing journey of a South African-born boy from a broken home who had started his military career as a private soldier in the Territorial Army. No wonder he was occasionally heard to remark: “I’m an ordinary man. What the bloody hell am I doing here?”

Brigadier Sir Miles Hunt-Davis, GCVO, MBE, private secretary to the Duke of Edinburgh, was born on November 7, 1938. He died from a bone marrow disorder on May 23, 2018, aged 79