

David Niven - A True Gent – and a National Treasure...

Written by Andy Owen



In my book, David Niven had *everything*...

He was the epitome of the dapper British gentleman - handsome, suave, debonair and charming.

He was also a scallywag - an endearing feature that he developed effectively throughout his career.

Right from early childhood, David was a pretty focused individual. He did his own thing, no matter what people thought. And he consistently developed that attitude as he grew older.

That single-minded and purposeful approach to life was his driving force to greatness – and gave us all a hugely talented man – rightly now cherished as one of Britain’s greatest actors, playing in around 100 movies.

When you hear anyone using the words '*quintessential Englishman*', David's smiling face, pencil moustache and effortless style, stride confidently into view.

They don't make them like David anymore. More's the pity...

James David Graham Niven was born in London in 1910 on St David's Day, into a longtime military family.

His father William, was of Scottish descent and his mother - Henrietta, was of French and British ancestry.

His father served in the Berkshire Yeomanry in the First World War and was killed at Gallipoli in 1915.

Two years after his death, Henrietta married Sir Thomas Comyn-Platt in London.



Over the years, it has been suggested by many, that Comyn-Platt and Henrietta had been having an affair for some time before her husband's death.

It's also said that Sir Thomas may well have been David Niven's biological father.

As you can see, there is a striking resemblance.

Niven attended a very strict private school as a child, where the 'rascal' in him, clearly surfaced very early in his life.

He was always playing pranks and received regular corporal punishment for it.

That didn't deter him at all and after a while, the school gave up on him - and he was expelled.

He was only 10 years old.

The family were very unhappy with him, as this ended his chances of going to Eton.

He was accepted at Stowe School, a newly-created public school, led by headmaster J.F. Roxburgh, who was very different to any of Niven's previous headmasters.

He was thoughtful and kind and called every boy by his first name.

He encouraged them to develop their personal interests.

Niven liked him a lot – and later wrote, *"He made every single boy at that school feel that what they said and what they did, were of real importance to him."*

After Stowe, he intended to follow a military career like his father and in 1928, he enrolled at the Royal Military College at Sandhurst.

Initially he was not too taken with it. *"It was never pleasant to be treated like mud,"* he wrote, *"but Sandhurst, at least, did it with style."*

He did very well there and cultivated the air of an 'officer and gentleman' that later became his trademark as an actor.

Mind you, he sailed close to the wind on many occasions.



One day, on duty as Commandant's Stick Orderly, his cross belt was inspected by the College Sergeant Major and it was found to contain cigarettes, matches and condoms in the pouch.

He was put on a charge. One of many during his time...

Despite his many misdemeanors, he graduated in 1930 with a commission as a second lieutenant in the regular Army.

Being of Scottish descent, he had his heart set on joining the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders or the Black Watch.

These were his first and second preferences, as he filled out the form, after graduation.

For the third choice, he couldn't resist a bit of humour. He jokingly wrote: "*Anything but the Highland Light Infantry.*" He said this, because they wore tartan trews rather than kilts.

He was mortified when The Command promptly assigned him to the HLI and he served his next three years with them, mostly on Malta.

His comments, incidentally, were known in the regiment, so one can imagine he received a fair amount of stick for them!

It appears he spent time attempting to lower his handicap playing polo at the Marsa Sports Grounds - and he then eventually came back to Dover.

Whilst in Malta he became friends with Roy Urquhart, the future commander of the British 1st Airborne Division and one of the key individuals in Operation Market Garden.



David Niven as a 2nd Lt with the Highland Light Infantry, back row far right.

During his time in the HLI, Niven had grown tired of the peacetime army.

He was promoted to Lieutenant on 1st January 1933, but this made little difference, as he saw no opportunity for further advancement.

His ultimate decision to resign came one day, after a lecture on machine guns, which became excruciatingly lengthy and was starting to seriously endanger his plans for dinner with a particularly attractive young lady.

At the end of the lecture, the speaker (a Major General no less) asked if there were any questions. Showing the typical rebelliousness of his early years, Niven asked, *"Could you tell me the time, sir? I have to catch a train"*

He was immediately placed under close-arrest for this act of insubordination.

His dinner-date now in tatters, he proceeded to share a bottle of whisky with the officer who was guarding him, Rhoddy Rose (later Colonel R.L.C. Rose, DSO, MC).

With Rose's help, Niven was allowed to escape from a first-floor window.

As David didn't do things by halves, he very quickly got on a boat and headed for America. While crossing the Atlantic, he resigned his commission by telegram on 6th September 1933.

Once there, he moved to New York and New Jersey, where he began unsuccessful careers in whisky sales and as a rodeo promoter in Atlantic City.

After colourful detours to Mexico, Bermuda and Cuba, he finally arrived in Hollywood in 1934.

He presented himself to Central Casting and was categorised as *'Anglo-Saxon Type No. 2008'*.

David described his first role as a film 'extra'.

"I was asked to say 'Goodbye my dear' to some lady getting on a train" he remembers. "And I was such a smash in that, that they hired me to say 'Hello my dear' to someone getting off a train."

In just a few words, Niven had distilled onto celluloid, the perfect English gentleman – suave and cheerful, sleek and charming.

His minor role in *Mutiny on the Bounty* brought him to the attention of independent film producer Samuel Goldwyn, who signed him to a contract and his career was on its way.

He was, I suppose, Hollywood's idea of an Englishman.

Niven appeared in mainly supporting roles in 19 films in the next four years. In 1939 he co-starred with Ginger Rogers in the RKO comedy *Bachelor Mother*.

But it was the role of Raffles, the eponymous gentleman safe cracker, that officially launched Niven into the 'A' list in 1939.



Niven in Raffles

Niven joined what became known as the 'Hollywood Raj', a group of British actors in Hollywood which included Rex Harrison, Boris Karloff, Stan Laurel, Basil Rathbone, Ronald Colman, Leslie Howard and C. Aubrey Smith.

He and Errol Flynn had become firm friends and they had created a bachelor pad in Malibu at 601 North Linden Drive.

They were renting it from Rosalind Russell.

They enjoyed life to the full at that house. Excesses were the norm and remember, there were no press intrusions or prying eyes.

Russell later named the house, '*Cirrhosis-by-the-Sea*'.

When World War II broke out, Niven immediately made plans to return home to serve. The British Embassy – surprisingly – tried to convince him to stay, as it did with pretty much every British expat in the US at the time.

But he ignored them, returned home and rejoined the Army.

He was the only British actor in Hollywood to do so.



Once back home, Niven was re-commissioned on 25th February 1940 as a lieutenant in the Rifle Brigade and was assigned to a motor training battalion.

Completely inappropriate.

And David being David, he told them so very quickly.

He wanted something much more exciting and asked for a transfer into the Commandos.

Whilst all this was going on, his already colourful love life suddenly went into technicolor.

One day, a certain young lady swept him off his feet.



Primula Susan Rollo was the aristocratic daughter of a British lawyer.

When she met Niven, 'Primmie' was working for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).

The romance was only two weeks old when he proposed and she accepted.

They married in Wiltshire, England on September 21st 1940.

Meanwhile, his transfer to the Commandos had been successful and he was given command of 'A' Squadron GHQ Liaison Regiment, later known as '*Phantom*'.

It was a special reconnaissance unit first formed in 1939 during the early stages of World War II.

The regiment's headquarters were at The Richmond Hill Hotel in Richmond, Surrey and its base (including the officers' mess and billet) was at Pembroke Lodge, a Georgian house in Richmond Park, London.

Their method of operations focused upon use of wireless communications and mobility - to provide real-time assessment from the front line.

Something that was so badly needed.

The collective codename for these missions was classified by themselves as '*Phantom*', which later became an official designation.

The Regiment became incredibly important throughout the course of the war.

They stayed in forward positions, often behind enemy lines, monitoring troop movements and listening in on Allied tank radio communications.

They then used small, specially-made radios to report back to Corps HQ, giving clear and up-to-date information on the battle faster than the information could filter through any other line of command.



Phantom patrols served in Africa, Italy, South-east Europe and, of course, France – and they were present in many significant battles.

During Operation Market Garden, Phantom officers were the only line of communication between the trapped British airborne at Arnhem and the XXX Corps unsuccessfully trying to relieve them.

It was these same officers who brought Major General Urquhart's famous, desperate message from the besieged forces: *"...unless physical contact is made with us early 25 Sept...consider it unlikely we can hold out long enough..."*

Phantom patrols were responsible for giving first news on many other events during the war. They were the first to report on the closing of the Falaise Gap, they provided some of the first information on concentration camps - and they tracked the movement of German armour during the Battle of the Bulge.



In fact, when American and Soviet troops linked up for the first time at the Elbe River on April 25th, 1945, a Phantom patrol attached to the U.S. 1st Army, was sent to the planned location in advance, witnessing and reporting on the historic moment.

Niven took part in D-Day, although he wasn't sent to France until a few days after 6th June. Some of his unit did jump with the other paratroopers the night before, while the rest landed on D+1.

Their job was to move around and report back on the location of all British, Canadian and American troops after the chaos of the night jumps and the first day on the beaches.



Niven worked with the Army Film Unit whenever asked and acted in two films made during the war - *The First of the Few* (1942) and *The Way Ahead* (1944).

Both were made with a view to winning support for the British war effort, especially in the US.

Niven's film unit work included a small part in the deception operation that used minor actor M.E. Clifton James, to impersonate Field Marshal Montgomery.

Niven remained pretty close-mouthed about the war, despite huge public interest in celebrities in combat.

He also had a real dislike for the newspaper columnists covering the war who typed out self-glorifying and excessively florid prose about their meagre wartime experiences.

Niven stated, *"Anyone who says a bullet sings past, hums past, flies, pings, or whines past, has never heard one - they go crack!"*

When pressed once in an interview to talk about the war, He said:

"I will tell you just one thing about the war, it will be my first story and my last. I was asked by some American friends to search out the grave of their son near Bastogne. I found it where they told me I would, but it was among 27,000 others - and I told myself that here, Niven, were 27,000 reasons why you should keep your mouth shut after the war."

However, he did relent a little, when he was writing his autobiography, *The Moon's a Balloon*.

He outlined a few of his private conversations with Winston Churchill, the bombing of London, and what it was like entering Germany with the occupation forces.

Niven first met Churchill at a dinner party in February 1940. Churchill singled him out from the crowd and stated:

"Young man, you did a fine thing to give up your film career to fight for your country. Mark you, had you not done so – it would have been despicable."

A few other stories have surfaced about Niven from other witnesses.

On one occasion, asked how he felt about serving with the British Army in Europe, he allegedly said, *"Well on the whole, I would rather be tickling Ginger Rogers' tits."*

Niven ended the war as a Lieutenant-Colonel.

Upon his return to Hollywood after the war, David Niven was awarded the Legion of Merit, an American military decoration presented by Eisenhower himself.

It honoured his work in creating the BBC Allied Expeditionary Forces Programme, a radio station for Allied forces.

In March 1946, Primmie and their sons, aged 3 and 4, joined Niven after a two-week journey by boat to Portland, Maine.

Two weeks later, they were settled in Hollywood, where David, already part of Errol Flynn's circle of hard-partying friends, quickly rejoined the social scene.

They bought a home next to his friend Douglas Fairbanks and embraced the Hollywood lifestyle.



Primmie loved their new California surroundings, and the couple enjoyed leisurely days golfing and fishing with Clark Gable at Pebble Beach, followed by dinners with Tyrone Power and his wife, Annabella.

Primmie also adored the party games that were all the rage in Hollywood in the 1930's and 40's.

At one of these evenings - a party at Power's house on May 19th, 1946, a game of Sardines - played in the dark - disaster struck.

Primmie, unfamiliar with the house, opened a door she thought was a closet and tumbled down steep cellar steps.

The other guests heard the crash and found her unconscious at the bottom. Although initially thought to have a concussion, she died two days later from a fractured skull.

She had been in Hollywood just six weeks. She was only 28 years old...

Niven was absolutely devastated, struggling to cope with his grief and care for his young sons. He later described this as the darkest period of his life, years later thanking his friends for their "patience and forbearance" during that time.

He also admitted, *"I thought for a while I had gone mad."*

Following a failed suicide attempt, he eventually rallied and returned to filmmaking. In 1948, while filming 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', Niven met Swedish model Hjärdis Genberg.

Their whirlwind romance, led to marriage just six weeks later.



Niven recalled their initial meeting on the set...

"I had never seen anything so beautiful in my life—tall, slim, auburn hair, up-tilted nose, lovely mouth, and the most enormous grey eyes I had ever seen.

It really happened the way it does when written by the worst lady novelists ... I goggled. I had difficulty swallowing and had champagne in my knees."

However, their relationship was tumultuous.

They adopted two daughters, Kristina and Fiona, in an attempt to salvage their marriage, but rumours swirled about Hjördis's infidelity and growing alcoholism.

To complicate matters further, Kristina many years later, told biographer Graham Lord, that she was convinced she was Niven's secret child by another model, Mona Gunnarson.

Niven's film career meanwhile, faced challenges.

During the next few years, Niven's long and complex relationship with Goldwyn, became restrictive for him - and he was largely barred from the Hollywood studios.

Between 1951 and 1956 he only made 11 films, two of which were MGM productions and the rest were low-budget British or independent productions.

However, Niven won a Golden Globe Award for his work in *The Moon Is Blue* (1953), produced and directed by Otto Preminger.

Niven also continued to work in television.

His big moment appeared in 1956 when he was cast as Phileas Fogg in Michael Todd's immensely successful production of *'Around the World in 80 Days.'*

It was a phenomenal worldwide smash that won 5 Oscars.

He was on a roll now and won his first Best Actor Oscar in 1958 for his role as Major David Angus Pollock in *'Separate Tables'*.

Appearing on-screen for only 23 minutes in the film, this is the briefest performance ever, to win a Best Actor Oscar.

But, by 1960, his marriage to Hjördis was on the rocks.

They briefly separated while he was filming 'Please Don't Eat the Daisies' with Doris Day, but they later reconciled.



Hjördis and David Niven, photographed en route to Sweden in November 1963

Niven continued acting, appearing in notable films such as *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), *The Pink Panther* (1963), *Murder by Death* (1976), and *Death on the Nile* (1978).

In 1967, he played a version of James Bond in the spoof *Casino Royale*. Bond creator Ian Fleming had originally wanted Niven to play Bond in *Dr. No* and the novels reference him directly, calling him 'the only real gentleman in Hollywood.'

One of the most memorable moments of Niven's later career came when he co-hosted the 46th Annual Academy Awards, where a streaker ran across the stage behind him.

Niven quipped:

"Isn't it fascinating to think that probably the only laugh that man will ever get in his life, is by stripping off and showing his shortcomings?"

In the 1970's, Niven spent much of his time in Switzerland, enjoying a close circle of friends, that included actor Roger Moore and writer William F. Buckley Jr.

But by 1975 Niven was having serious health problems.

He began experiencing fatigue, muscle weakness and a warble in his voice. A 1981 interview on Michael Parkinson's talk show, alarmed family and friends.

Viewers wondered if Niven had either been drinking or suffered a stroke.



He was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS,) later that year.

ALS is a nervous system disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. It is a type of motor neurone disease, for which there is still no cure.

He hosted the 1981 American Film Institute tribute to Fred Astaire, which was his final appearance in Hollywood.

In February 1983, Niven was hospitalised for ten days, ostensibly for a digestive problem. Afterwards, he returned to his chalet at Chateau d'Oex, where his condition continued to decline.

He refused to return to the hospital - and his family supported his decision.

Niven died as a result of ALS on 29th July 1983, aged 73.

Bitter, estranged and plagued by depression, Niven's second wife Hjördis showed up drunk at the funeral, having been persuaded to attend by family friend Prince Rainier III of Monaco.

Hjördis then added insult to injury, by forbidding them to bury her alongside her husband in the place left for her in his double grave in Switzerland.

Hjördis stopped drinking for a time after Niven's death, but resumed before her own death from a stroke in 1997 at age 78.

Niven's friend Billie More commented:

"This is not kind, but when Hjördis died, I can't think of a single soul who was sorry."

David Niven was a very special man and worthy of great respect.

His bravery and skill in wartime, his incredible Hollywood career, his ability as a raconteur /writer and his tough battle with a dreadful disease - all showcased an extraordinary man.

He is still adored by the British public to this day.

A Thanksgiving service was held at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, on 27th October 1983.

The congregation of 1,200 included Prince Michael of Kent, Margaret, Duchess of Argyll, Sir John Mills, Sir Richard Attenborough, Trevor Howard, Sir David Frost, Joanna Lumley, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. and Lord Olivier.

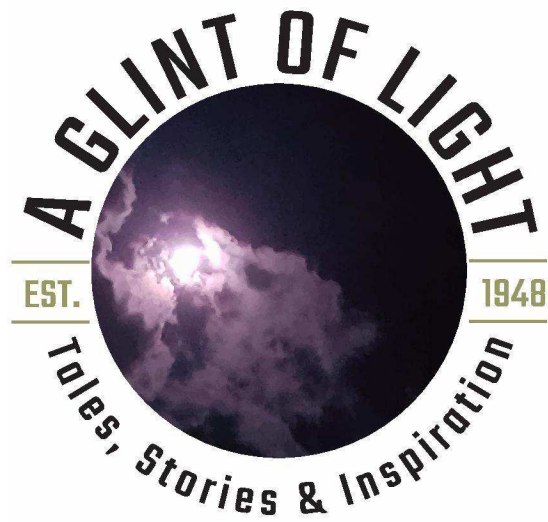
The biggest wreath at the service - worthy of a Mafia Godfather's funeral - was delivered from the porters at London's Heathrow Airport, along with a card that read:

'To the finest gentleman who ever walked through these halls. He made a porter feel like a king'.

David would have *loved* that...



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