

WATKINS, Sir TASKER (1918-2007), barrister and judge

Name: Tasker Watkins
Date of birth: 1918
Date of death: 2007
Spouse: Margaret Eirwen Watkins (née Evans)
Child: Mair Watkins
Child: Rhodri Watkins
Parent: Jane Watkins (née Phillips)
Parent: Bertram Watkins
Gender: Male
Occupation: barrister and judge
Area of activity: Law
Author: John Griffith Williams

Tasker Watkins was born on 18 November 1918 at 9 Station Terrace, Nelson, Glamorgan, the second son and the fourth of seven children of Bertram Watkins, an engine fitter and later a government employee, and his wife Jane (née Phillips). His father and grandfather both fought in Kitchener's Army and his father's two brothers were killed fighting with the Welsh Guards in the First World War.

He won a scholarship to Pontypridd Grammar School where he was a promising student, but unfortunately his schooling was brought to an untimely end, and before he could take the national examinations, when his parents were forced to join the economic diaspora from the valleys of south Wales to England to find work. Moving to Dagenham, he worked to make good his lack of academic qualifications by attending night schools and by private study, reading carefully selected literature in what became a life-long interest in the written word which provided him with an exceptional command of the English language, both written and spoken. At the outbreak of the Second World War, he was employed in the export department of Crookes Laboratories Limited, studying to be a commercial attaché prior to a posting to Brazil.

On 16 October 1939, he enlisted in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. Following completion of his basic training in Bodmin, he was sent to an Officer Cadet Training Unit. On 17 May 1941, newly commissioned a second lieutenant into the Welch Regiment, he married (Margaret) Eirwen Evans, the elder daughter of John Rees Evans, a driver, and Kate Dilys (née Davies). They had a daughter, Mair, and a son, Rhodri.

While the forces were being trained for the invasion of Europe, Watkins was posted in August 1943 as an instructor in the Rifle wing of the Advanced Handling and Fieldcraft school near Llanberis, Caernarfonshire. After the invasion of Europe in June 1944, he was posted to 103 Reinforcement Group in Normandy and on 25 July 1944 he joined 1st/5th Battalion of the Welch Regiment, a part of 158 Brigade of the 53rd (Welsh) Division which was then containing the left flank of the Falaise 'pocket' as the Allied forces tried to close the gap between Falaise and Argentan to trap the retreating German army. On 16 August the 1st/5th Battalion was ordered to cut the main road from Falaise to the west. Observing the enemy to their front, the decision was taken to attack with two companies with tanks in support. Unfortunately there was a complete breakdown of wireless contact between the two companies and orders from the Brigade to stand fast could not be communicated to the two companies, who were well ahead. B Company (including Watkins) were last spotted crossing the Falaise road heading straight for their objective. By 0100 hours B company had been given up as lost when Watkins returned to the battalion lines with 27 survivors. The citation in the *London Gazette* of 31 October 1944 reads:

While commanding a company of the Welch Regiment in North-West Europe on August 16th, the battalion was ordered to attack objectives near the railway at Balfour.

Lieutenant Watkins' company had to cross open cornfields in which booby traps had been set. It was not yet dusk and the company soon came under heavy machine-gun fire from posts in the corn and further back, and also from an 88mm gun; many casualties were caused and the advance was slowed up.

Lieutenant Watkins, the only officer left, placed himself at the head of his men and under short range fire charged two posts in succession, personally killing or wounding the occupants with his Sten gun. On reaching his objective he found an anti-tank gun manned by a German soldier; his Sten gun jammed, so he threw it in the German's face and shot him with his pistol before he had time to recover.

Lieutenant Watkins' company now had only some 30 men left and was counter-attacked by 50 enemy infantry. Lieutenant Watkins directed the fire of his men and then led a bayonet charge, which resulted in the almost complete destruction of the enemy.

It was now dusk and orders were given for the battalion to withdraw. These orders were not received by Lieutenant Watkins' company as the wireless set had been destroyed. They now found themselves alone and surrounded in depleted numbers and in failing light. Lieutenant Watkins decided to rejoin his battalion by passing round the flank of the enemy position through which he had advanced but while passing through the cornfields once more, he was challenged by an enemy post at close range. He ordered his men to scatter and himself charged the post with a Bren gun and silenced it. He then led the remnants of his company back to battalion headquarters.

His superb gallantry and total disregard for his own safety during an extremely difficult period were responsible for saving the lives of his men, and had a decisive influence on the course of the battle.

Watkins was decorated with the Victoria Cross by King George VI on 8 March 1945 at Buckingham Palace. He was famously reticent both in public and in private about his gallantry, choosing not to talk about it, but he was reported as saying "The boys were wonderful. They were Welsh" (*Western Mail* 9 May 1945) and when he was interviewed in 2001 he said - "You must believe me when I say it was just another day in the life of a soldier. I did what needed doing to help colleagues and friends, just as others looked out for me during fighting that summer ... I didn't wake up the next day a better or braver person, just different. I'd seen more killing and death in 24 hours - indeed been part of that terrible process - than is right for anybody. From that point onwards I have tried to take a more caring view of my fellow beings, and that, of course, always includes your opponent, whether it be in war, sport or just life generally". (*Daily Telegraph* 8 November 2001)

As the 53rd (Welsh) Division advanced across Normandy, through Belgium and into the Netherlands, Watkins was promoted captain and on 22nd September 1944, he was appointed acting major. Commanding a rifle company of the 1st/5th Battalion, Watkins took part in the liberation of the Dutch city of s'Hertogenbosch, which was heavily defended by the Germans. The battle, which lasted from 22-27 October with every street and house having to be cleared, was regarded as the greatest battle of the 53rd (Welsh) Division in the campaign. During the battle Watkins was badly wounded by mortar bomb shrapnel. The wounds were serious enough for doctors to consider amputation of his leg but he persuaded them not to. On his discharge from hospital, he was no longer fit for active service and was posted on 6 December to command C Company at 164 OCTU in Trenthan. He was released from active military service on 28 May 1945 when he was granted the honorary rank of Major.

The liberation of s'Hertogenbosch established a friendly link between the people of the city and Wales in general, and the Division in particular. On 27 October 1945, the Division was awarded the freedom of the city. Watkins was a leading force in maintaining the Division's links with the city thereafter, attending commemorative meetings regularly until the 50th anniversary celebrations in the city in 1994.

In February 1945, while recuperating from his wounds, he applied to the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple for Admission with Dispensation of Educational Qualifications. Granted dispensation, on demobilization he moved with his wife and daughter to Llandaff, then on the outskirts of Cardiff, which was to be his home for the rest of his life. There he attended a law college and studied for the Bar Finals finding peace and quiet for study in the bomb damaged Cathedral not far from the rented accommodation his family shared with another family. The cathedral was to become his parish church and very close to his heart. He served on the regimental committee set up to build the Welch Regiment chapel (the St David's Chapel) where he is commemorated. He passed his Bar finals and was called to the Bar by the Middle Temple on 9 June 1948. In 1970, he was made a Bencher and in 1998 he was the Autumn Reader.

At that time, he was a supporter of the Liberal Party and spoke at public meetings in support of the candidacy of **Roderic Bowen** for the constituency of Cardigan in the 1951 general election and subsequently, but he refused an approach by members of the Liberal Party who offered him a safe seat to stand as a parliamentary candidate and he lost interest in any active involvement in politics.

On completion of his pupillage to Griffith Owen George in the chambers of D Morgan Evans in Cardiff, he joined those chambers. He quickly developed a wide-ranging and very successful practice on the Wales & Chester Circuit, and was among those who undertook substantial civil and criminal work and met the increasing demand for

representation in public inquiries. He was a loyal member of the Circuit and in due course became its treasurer and in 1970, its leader. As the circuit's representative, he was faced with the proposal of the Royal Commission into the future of the Assizes and Quarter Sessions 1966-69 that a satisfactory service for the administration of the courts in Wales could be provided by a North West Circuit, comprising the Northern Circuit and North Wales and a South West Circuit, comprising the Western Circuit, Gloucestershire, Monmouthshire and South Wales. He played an important part in pressing the case for the retention of the Wales & Chester Circuit and the eventual recommendation of the Commission that the Wales & Chester Circuit be retained with the addition of Monmouthshire.

On his appointment as Queen's Counsel in 1965, he followed the convention of the time and joined chambers in London - 1 Crown Office Row in the Temple - where he quickly established a practice in London and abroad. But he retained his professional links with Wales where he appeared in many of the most important civil and criminal cases. His civil practice included litigation involving the coal industry and medical negligence; his practice in the criminal courts included the prosecution of the members of the Free Wales Army at the Swansea Assizes in 1969. His appearances in public inquiries included the Tribunal into the Aberfan Disaster of 1966, when he appeared as deputy to the Attorney General, Sir Elwyn Jones as counsel to the Tribunal and as such assumed the burdensome responsibility of collating and presenting the evidence to find out what had caused a coal tip above the village to slip and take the lives of 144 people, of whom 116 were children who died when their school was engulfed. The disaster itself was the more poignant as it occurred in a village a few miles from his birthplace and because a number of his nephews had rushed to play their part in the rescue of those buried under the landslide. He considered, without remuneration, claims made to the Aberfan Disaster Fund and made recommendations to the management committee in respect of any entitlement to payment from the Fund.

He was recognised as a brilliant and forceful advocate whose style of advocacy suited any tribunal. He was an outstanding jury advocate with a concise and probing style that never failed to hold the attention of judge and jury alike. Although he was not regarded as a profound lawyer, he had a sound grasp of principle and excellent judgment, qualities which, with his first rate judicial temperament, served him well.

He was chairman of the Mental Health Appeal Tribunal for Wales (1960-71), Recorder of Merthyr Tydfil (1968-70) and Recorder of Swansea (1970-1). In 1970, he conducted the public inquiry into the ill-treatment of mentally ill patients at Farleigh Hospital in Somerset. His report told a grim story of self-satisfaction and set attitudes at all levels of staff and recommended a code of conduct for nurses for the handling of violent patients.

In 1971 he was appointed to the High Court bench and knighted. He was assigned initially to the newly created Family Division and transferred to the Queen's Bench Division in October 1974. He was a presiding judge on the Wales & Chester Circuit from 1975 until his appointment to the Court of Appeal and to the Privy Council in 1980. He was the first chairman of the Judicial Studies Board (1979-80), the newly created body to train the judiciary.

His appointment to the Court of Appeal coincided with the appointment of Geoffrey Lane, a close friend with whom he was temperamentally attuned, as Lord Chief Justice. By then the ever increasing duties of the Lord Chief Justice had become too burdensome and Lord Lane needed to delegate the day-to-day supervision of the six circuits, judicial administration and judicial training. In Watkins, he found a man blessed not only with a great sense of public duty but also ideally fitted by temperament and experience to take on the work. Together they made a formidable team.

In 1982, Watkins headed a working party set up by Lord Lane which proposed changes in Crown Court procedure designed to speed up and cut the costs of criminal trials. In 1983, Lord Lane, having persuaded the Lord Chancellor to create the new judicial office of Senior Presiding Judge for England & Wales, appointed him to that office, a position he held until 1988. As senior presiding judge, he encouraged and supported all levels of the judiciary in the drive for greater efficiencies in both the criminal and the civil courts. In 1988, Lord Lane appointed him the first Deputy Chief Justice, and he worked closely with Lord Lane on judicial postings and the administration of the criminal justice system. In 1991, he was a part of a constitution of the Court of Appeal headed by Lord Lane, which established that husbands living apart from their wives could be convicted of raping them. On Lord Lane's retirement in 1992, he provided the same support to his successor Lord Taylor of Gosforth who retained him as Deputy Chief Justice until he retired in 1993. He was appointed GBE in 1990.

In court, he was always crisp and efficient, directing himself and others to the heart of the matter, concerned to produce the outcome demanded by justice. He was kind to the young and inexperienced advocate but impatient of idleness and under-preparation. He brought to the judicial bench wisdom and sensitivity and understanding of humanity. He was much loved by bar and bench, but not perhaps by the criminals whose sentences he reviewed.

He held many positions in the public life of Wales. He was appointed a deputy lieutenant for the County of Glamorgan in 1956. He was president of the Royal British Legion, Wales (1947-68) and chairman for many years of the Glamorgan committee of the Army Benevolent Fund. He was president of the University of Wales College of Medicine from 1987 to 1998. In July 1985, he was awarded an honorary fellowship of the American College of Trial Lawyers. He was awarded an honorary fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1992. He was appointed a knight of the Order of St John in 1998. He was awarded honorary doctorates of law by the Universities of Wales and Glamorgan. In April 2006 he was made a Freeman of the City of Cardiff, when the Lord Mayor described him as 'one of Wales' most notable citizens'.

Watkins was an enthusiastic fly half and supporter of Rugby Union football. When he moved to Cardiff in 1946, he joined the Glamorgan Wanderers RFC with which he enjoyed a long association as player (he captained the second XV), committee member, chairman and, from 1968 until his death, president. On his retirement in 1993, he was elected president of the Welsh Rugby Union, an office he held following unopposed elections until 2004 when he decided not to seek re-election and he was appointed an honorary life vice patron of the WRU, a position created especially for him, the patron being the Queen and the vice patron Prince William of Wales. The appointment was a recognition of his leadership and the part he played in overseeing the transition from the amateur to the professional game. Although not a supporter of the professional game, which he considered the antithesis of the game in Wales with its strengths in the villages and local communities, he accepted the inevitability of the change and played a crucial role in the development of Welsh rugby by chairing a committee which proposed the far-sighted overhaul of the WRU; while the proposal did not achieve the required 75% majority for implementation, its review led to wholesale changes in the management of the WRU in 2002.

He was much admired by the players and Graham Henry, the Welsh team coach pinned up a copy of the Victoria Cross citation in the players' changing room before Six Nations matches. The team wore black arm bands in tribute to him when they played their opening game of the Rugby World Cup on the day he died. His after-dinner speeches at post international match dinners and on other occasions were noted for their lightness of touch, their warmth and good humour. He was chairman of the WRU's Charitable Trust from its inception in 1975; under his leadership, the trust was very active in promoting the needs of injured players and in particular the paraplegics. On 15 November 2009, a statue of Watkins, sculpted by the Llantwit Major sculptor, Roger Andrews was unveiled outside the main entrance to the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff by his daughter Mair.

Watkins never forgot his roots and was totally self-effacing. He relaxed away from the burdens of his professional and judicial lives on the golf course and watching Glamorgan Wanderers on a Saturday afternoon, walking the touchline as he supported the team and drinking no more than three half pints of beer in the bar afterwards.

He was an intensely private person with a strong family life. He was devoted to his wife, Eirwen with whom he shared their abiding grief at the loss of their son Rhodri who died in 1982. His inner life and his dealings with all manner of people was based on his abiding Christian faith. He kept the *Bible* at his bedside and in a wide ranging conversation with the Archbishop of Wales, he spoke about his belief in God and the need for prayer. He said he had seen how faith had helped soldiers under his command "when the chips were down" and that was real faith.

Tasker Watkins died on 9 September 2007 at the University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff. His funeral was held at Llandaff Cathedral on 15 September with a bearer party of officers of the Royal Regiment of Wales carrying his coffin. Memorial Services were held on 1 December 2007 simultaneously at Llandaff Cathedral and St John's Cathedral in s'Hertogenbosch.

He was a warm, modest and companionable man who occupied a unique position in the life of Wales. In a letter to his daughter written after his death, the Prince of Wales described him as 'a truly great Welshman' and said 'the fame of his courageous exploits and selfless service will live on in the annals of Welsh history'.

Author

John Griffith Williams

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Further Reading

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Wikipedia Article: Tasker Watkins

Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q7687359](https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q7687359)

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