

MY HISTORY HERO

Broadcaster *Mishal Husain* chooses

Claude Auchinleck

1884–1981



Claude Auchinleck in 1942 in Africa, where he played a crucial role for the Allies. He was a man rooted in humility and guided by integrity, says Mishal Husain

IN PROFILE

Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck was a British career soldier who saw active service in the First World War, and later served with distinction during the Second World War. 'The Auk', as he was dubbed, was commander-in-chief of the British Indian Army in 1941 and 1943–47, and commander-in-chief of British forces in the Middle East from July 1941 to August 1942. He died in Morocco at the age of 96.

// Churchill belatedly recognised Auchinleck's importance, saying that he was 'the greatest British general of the war' //



Mishal Husain is a journalist and broadcaster. Her memoir, *Broken Threads: My Family from Empire to Independence* (Fourth Estate), is out now in paperback. *The Mishal Husain Show* from Bloomberg Weekend is available on podcast platforms and YouTube

When did you first hear about Auchinleck?

Growing up, because he was a hero of my family, particularly my grandfather who worked for him in the 18 months before the partition of India and the birth of Pakistan. My grandfather thought him a man of great integrity and, when I researched my family memoir, I realised that his assessment was right: Auchinleck was a great British hero.

What kind of man was he?

He did not have a privileged background, lost his father at an early age, and got into Wellington College, a public school, only through its scheme for the sons of deceased soldiers. He joined the Indian Army largely because it was cheaper than becoming an officer in the British Army. He was the kind of officer who ate with his men, and made a point of learning the languages of his troops [in the Indian Army]. He was also good at giving credit where it was due, unlike some figures in authority.

What made Auchinleck a hero?

First, the crucial role he played in helping to turn the tide against the Germans at the first battle of El Alamein in 1942 – a terrible year for the Allies, when it was not at all clear whether they would win the war. Second, his handling of the thorny issue of what to do with Indian soldiers who had defected to the Japanese. He made an effort to differentiate between those who had committed acts of brutality and those who found themselves in an impossible situation and switched sides. Third, the way he sought to ensure that the Indian Army remained above the communal fray at partition in 1947. His views on race, class and religion were ahead of his time in many ways.

What was his finest hour?

All of the above, really. He played a crucial role in thwarting Rommel's advance in north Africa, and drew up the plan that Montgomery [who succeeded Auchinleck, as commander of the Eighth Army] later used to win the second battle of El Alamein in the autumn of 1942. I find it baffling that Auchinleck's actions in laying the foundations for that success have never really been fully appreciated. However, Churchill himself seems to have belatedly recognised his importance, and is said to have told a young Conservative MP not long after the end of the Second World War that Auchinleck was "the greatest British general of the war".

Is there anything that you don't admire about him?

No, though it's worth pointing out that he had a lot of sadness in his life. His wife left him for a fellow officer in quite public circumstances.

What would you say to Auchinleck if you could meet him?

I'd say that I recognised what hard times he had to live through and show leadership in. I'd also express my sadness at the fact that he was not better known in his own country. **EH**

Mishal Husain was talking to York Membery