

2812 TRIBUTE TO JOHN CHRISTOPHER SPRENT

By David Sprent

Good afternoon and thank you all for joining us in the church, the Merry Bells and on Zoom.

Today we are here to say goodbye to Chris and we plan to share some happy memories of his family life, his career in the R.A.F. and his activities with the church and the village

Thank you to John Allison who will talk about Chris' career and to Mark Williams who will make the address.

I would also like to acknowledge two very special people who knew Chris better than any of us. Firstly Simon Sprent, his younger brother, who grew up with Chris through the war until Chris joined the R.A.F. Simon has shared the following...

"In 1940, when our father Philip joined the Middlesex Regiment as their Chaplain, the family moved to Uplyme, near Lyme Regis. Our mother, Lois, was out all day working on a local farm, so she put Christopher, then aged 9, in charge of the three younger siblings. This responsibility lasted until he left home for National Service in 1949, giving him a strong sense of responsibility and care for other people, and developed his leadership and compassionate skills. This also created a strong bond for close family relationships among the four of us. This gave us an incredible sense of all being of one Unity. I know that this togetherness will continue in the broad framework of children, grandchildren, cousins, nephews and nieces, and now a great-grandchild many who are here today." Thank you for these lovely words, Simon.

Secondly, Carol, my Mum, who from the age of 19 and for the next 67 years has been beside Dad as a loving partner and wonderful mother and grandmother. They were always together, walking, talking, cycling, and bickering but they were the best of friends and truly loved each other.

A couple of weeks ago, Rachel and I walked up to Shotover and along the Lyme Tree walk. A walk my parents have done 100s of times. As we walked past the lake, Rachel mentioned that lately one of the two swans had died and as swans mate for life, the other was on its own and just paddled around the pond looking rather lost. Mum, I cannot bear to think how you are feeling without Dad.

So, at this time our thoughts go back to remember the wonderful times that we, Sarah, Rachel, Peter and I shared with Dad.

Of course, like all in his generation Dad was very busy, working long hours and flying at strange times. He always found time to show warmth and compassion. When we were ill or needed help, he was always there to support and listen. Sarah remembers the time when she was in hospital with a burst appendix. Mum was home with her hands full looking after the rest of us, Dad was working in the centre of London with a long commute. But every night he would leave work early, travel on the train and spend time with Sarah before he came home.

Dad also liked to laugh, have fun and sometimes be a bit mischievousness.

We were lucky as a family to have two great aunts who lived in a house on the seafront at Lyme Regis. Tourists used to walk past under the patio. Dad would love to show us how to create pea shooters and then fire dried peas at "grockels" passing by. I think this activity was also passed down to the grandchildren!

Dad loved the seaside, whether here in England on the south coast, in Greece or further afield in the world. He loved swimming, building sandcastles, burying various objects including children, motorbiking along the beach with Peter in Oman, damming up streams or just lying with Mum sunbathing.....I am sure our cousins remember the many times we built circular barriers on shallow beaches to withstand the rising tide. Dad and the rest of us would be madly shovelling sand to see how long we could last inside our fortress before the sea overwhelmed us and we had wade back to dry land!

He also enjoyed sport, in particular, when he went to Wembley to see Oxford United play a few years ago.

I remember when he took me to my first game 53 years ago, it was a sell-out crowd, Chelsea vs Leeds (2nd vs 3rd in the old first division.) we stood in the North Stand and he spent his whole time stopping me being squashed by the crowd!

Dad was also a very practical man (maybe driven by a touch of stinginess). We moved from Scotland to London in the late 60s. I think it was the first house that we had owned and we had no furniture having lived in rental or RAF accommodation until then. During the summer we, the children, went to

stay with the great aunts down in Dorset whilst he set about designing and building a whole set of furniture including a double bed and a sofa. Later on in life, Dad was happy to share these woodworking skills with many of the grandchildren as they sneaked off into the garage to find old bits of wood and come back with miniature battleships and aeroplanes that usually ended up floating in the bath!

As a family we moved many times, I think I lived in 15 houses in my first 18 years but despite the constant moves, one of Dad's first tasks was to get out into the garden and prepare the ground for planting whether they were beautiful flowers, tasteful berries, or plump tomatoes, he usually got results after 6 months!

I asked Mum what some of her favourite memories were of Dad and she said that she loved the "adventurer" in him. When they were travelling or holidaying, there would always be a "plan", then the "packing up" and finally "the journey" to wonderfully interesting places. On many trips, of course, there was an airfield nearby which we would have to stop at to watch the planes taking off and landing. Peter remembers when Mum and Dad visited him in South Africa, taking the train from Joburg to Cape Town and then driving back, 1000 of miles! Dad loved to drive, he once insisted we drive non-stop from New Orleans to Chicago, over 1000 miles in 18 hours.

He was always curious to learn more about people and events, keeping up with the news via radio 4, BBC news and of course The Times. Even during COVID, Dad would insist on going to the local co-op to pick up his daily paper.

With his encyclopaedic knowledge of history and current events, there were many robust conversations over Sunday lunch with his voice usually getting louder and louder!

Finally, I remember Dad as a very loving person both as a husband, father, grandfather, and great grandfather. His love, compassion, energy, and adventurous spirit has created a legacy that has been passed down to us and to our children. His joy when he welcomed us at Farm Close Lane or when he arrived to visit us was always overwhelming.

But to describe this better, I would like to hand over to my daughter, Ayelen

Tribute to Chris Sprent

By Sir John Allison

Chris' family has entrusted me to say a few words about his life in the context of the RAF. I am honoured to do so.

Chris was 12 years older than me and, when he was awarded his wings, I was still in Primary School. We did not meet until he was in mid-career and, when we did, he was my commanding officer.

Chris used his National Service to fulfil his ambition to become an RAF pilot. By the mid-1950s, about the time I went off to grammar school, he was an experienced pilot and a qualified flying instructor. He was selected for an exchange tour with the RCAF - an accolade, because the RAF only sends its best officers and pilots to fly with allied air forces.

This was life-changing for Chris and for a young girl growing up in Winnipeg. I refer of course to Carol. At the end of his tour, they came to England as man and wife and with their first child, Sarah, on the way.

I do not want to intrude on the family story because that will be better told by members of the family, but Carol's unwavering love and support is central to understanding Chris in the RAF, because in our day the Service placed huge importance on family life and recognised especially the value of wifely support to those appointed to the most demanding jobs.

Just imagine the huge challenge faced by a young woman who had not only to adjust to marriage, but also to life in a country she did not know, thousands of miles from her home and family. [No SATCOM in those days either, only letters and pre-booked phone calls by undersea cable]

Carol must have been very sure that she had found a good man. Well, she was right, as anyone who ever knew Chris will testify.

One feature of RAF life was constant moves, as any one job (or posting) only lasted 2 to 3 years, then you were moved to something different, generally in a different location. Gamely, Carol followed the flag, together with their expanding family, to Wales, Lincolnshire, then Germany, back to Hampshire, then Scotland - you get the idea. And that's not all of it.

I should also explain that the Armed Forces place a very high value on an officer's experience in command, especially so if in charge of front line units. In the RAF command of an operational squadron and, at the next level, of a front line station, was prized above all else, so it was significant that in 1970 Chris was promoted to Wing Commander and chosen to command No 31 Squadron, flying Phantoms at RAF Bruggen in Germany. I still had not met him and never served on No 31 Squadron, but the testament of an officer, Andrew Lambert, who knew him from 31 Squadron days as well as earlier times in their careers, is entirely consistent with my own thoughts and those of others I have spoken with, all of whom remember Chris with fondness. Andy wrote:

"I served briefly with him on No 31 Sqn which, under his command, was a squadron with a great attitude and very much a can-do mentality. Chris, despite the rank difference, had the knack of great friendship, and of putting even the most junior officer at his ease. I always valued his advice and guidance."

In 1977, Chris was promoted to the rank of Group Captain and the RAF gave him the second great prize - he was appointed to command RAF Coningsby, a Phantom base in Lincolnshire with the added attraction that it was (and still is) the home of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight.

And that is where Chris' career finally crossed with mine. At the time I was a young and rather brash and opinionated wing commander, commanding the Phantom Operational Conversion Unit. I mention my youthful character shortcomings because Chris tolerated them better than most people.

My first impression was of a big friendly guy with a likeable manner and a most attractive speaking voice. I soon discovered that his huge strength was that he was exactly the person he presented to the world, which made him very easy to understand and to trust. He had a remarkable habit of thinking aloud, not with everyone, maybe only with people he trusted, sharing his mind freely. He was about as open a man as I have ever known.

As a commanding officer he was, as a good leader should be, fair and decent to everyone and caring of the welfare of those under him. Professionally, he knew his business and Coningsby was well run under his leadership. His credibility was much helped by the fact that he was a widely experienced and competent pilot and, moreover, he actually enjoyed flying and had retained his appetite and motivation to fly. I should explain that this was important,

because junior aircrew look sardonically on their seniors' flying ability and are quick to notice if they have lost their edge. I respected Chris both for his flying and for his leadership as my Commanding Officer.

I will tell a short personal story to illustrate one of his defining qualities, which was kindness [my last Spitfire trip]. Chris understood, both as a human being and as a fellow aviator. I loved him for that.

It was typical of him that, on leaving the Service in 1988, he should disdain work in the defence industry, where opportunities would have been wide open to someone with his profile, and instead take a job as Chief Flying Instructor at the civil flying club at High Wycombe. And it was tragic for him that injuries from an accident not of his making a year later should have robbed him of further flying.

It was also typical that in retirement he became involved, as President, I think, of the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire branch of the National Service (RAF) Association. Later, he got me involved, even though I was not a national serviceman. In his own way, Chris was continuing to serve, certainly to serve his former comrades who, like him, loved the RAF.

I hope that I have given some insights into someone who happened to be a splendid officer and a fine pilot and who was, above all, a truly good and lovable man.