

DAD'S EULOGY

FRIDAY 4TH NOVEMBER 2016

Whilst walking in my local park this week, it struck me the beauty of the different seasons. Spring arrives with beautiful blossoms, birdsong and the glimpse of the better weather to come. Long warm summer days follow and then the autumn brings with it the vivid colours of the falling leaves and often spoils us with unexpectedly warm and sunny days. Winter can also surprise us with crisp, clear days, beautiful frosts and snowy hills, but inevitably brings with it the stark reality of the end of a lifecycle.

Our lives often follow much the same pattern and I can happily say that Dad enjoyed some wonderful weather in his lifetime!

Springtime

Dad's story starts in the Victoria Nursing Home in Shanghai on 31st March 1926. Born to Walter James and Muriel Jane Brown, he benefitted from a very privileged start in life, in fact my mother would often say that he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Indeed, as a child I was intrigued by his baby toys which included a solid silver rattle and a teething ring with a solid silver teddy bear attached. Things reminiscent of a time when life was bountiful.

He grew up in the company of a Japanese armour and his older sister, Amy and the springtime of his life was by all accounts a happy and carefree time. Indeed, my grandmother recorded in his baby book that he laughs and coos all the time. So happy. From five months onwards he is everyone's friend, a smile for all. Little change there then.

A year or so later, his mother again records that by 2 years he says anything and chatters all day long. Oh yes, this all sounds terribly familiar! She went on, loves soldiers and marching and his favourite toy is a motor car. Need I say any more?

He started school in September 1930 at four and a half years of age and seemed to settle into school life well and in 1933, he followed in the footsteps of his uncles and aunts and moved to one of the Chefoo Inland Missionary Schools to join his sister there. In his school report of that year, his conduct was reported as being only 'fairly good' he obviously had his moments too!

Fast forward a couple of years to January 1935 and we see the first of several of Dad's remarkable adventures at sea. He was returning from Shanghai with his fellow schoolmates following the Christmas holiday on board the SS Tungchow when, just outside the mouth of the Yangtze, pirates boarded the ship. A guard was shot dead and an engineer wounded, but fortunately, all the children on board survived unscathed. Their ship was found in Bias Bay by HMS Hermes and they were escorted to the safety of Hong Kong by the destroyer HMS Dainty. I believe Dad was more interested in the fact that the pirates had taken his brand new watch, than the fact that the story made the front page of the China Daily News!

Conditions in the school in Shantung Province were primitive with Dad describing the dormitories as having bare wooden floors with no mats or rugs and walls made of compacted earth and straw, covered with whitewash. He recounts how: 'There was no hot or cold running water. The water we used for washing was from large china

jugs which were filled from tin cans suspended from bamboo poles and brought up from wells outside by the coolies employed by the school.ô

Unsurprisingly the harsh winters and lack of sufficient heating took its toll on Dad's health and he became seriously ill and was admitted to the school's sick bay. Thankfully my grandmother made the long two and a half day journey north from Shanghai to Chefoo to nurse him back to health. Dad would recall how she was horrified on her arrival at the school to learn that he had been put on a starvation diet. She immediately took to feeding him up with boiled eggs and happily he made a full recovery. Sadly his schoolmate in the next bed to him had no such luck and passed away. Dad was clearly a born survivor.

He and his sister, Amy, continued their schooling there until 1937, when the family took the decision to send them back to the UK to complete their education, whilst their parents remained in Shanghai.

It was at this point that tragedy struck. Amy collapsed on October 1st and a specialist diagnosed Infantile Paralysis (otherwise known as polio). In spite of valiant efforts to save her Amy passed away just 2 days later. We can only imagine the shock that all the family felt at her sudden and totally unexpected death.

Dad spent the next 2 years at his Prep School, Winchester Lodge, in Torquay and was just about to start at his new school, Monkton Coombe, near Bath, when war broke out in September 1939. The evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk in early 1940 served as a catalyst and prompted many ex-pat families to withdraw their children from schools around the UK in fear of imminent invasion by Germany. And so it was that Dad was amongst a party of 50 boys and girls to sail out of Liverpool in June 1940 bound once more for Shanghai.

By September 1940 Dad had returned to his old school in Chefoo and had rejoined his former classmates. Sadly this reunion was to be short-lived as by early 1941 British subjects in China were being strongly advised to leave the country due to the ever-mounting threat from the Japanese. My grandfather then had to make the difficult decision as to where to send his wife and son. He eventually opted to send them to the safety of Sydney, Australia and as a result Dad was enrolled at Shore School in North Sydney where he completed his education until November 1943.

During this time Dad's father and other relatives were interned in the Yang Chow civilian camp in China. As for many other families, there was no contact with those who were interned for the whole of the rest of the war and this must have put a huge strain on all those involved.

As you would expect with such a rich family history in seafaring, by now Dad was keen to join up, but although he was then still resident in Australia, there was only one navy for him: the Royal Navy. Therefore in January 1944 he and his mother sailed from Sydney destined for Liverpool, a journey which took them three and a half months and which was, itself, fraught with danger.

On arrival in the UK in May 1944 Dad headed straight for Torbay to re-join his grandparents in Three Beaches and it was from there that he volunteered to join up and was eventually called up for service in the July.

After completing his Commission Warrant training he joined his beloved HMS Belfast in South Shields, having volunteered for service with the British Pacific Fleet. Dad described this posting as his first stroke of good luck in a bizarre sequence of co-

incidences. He was indeed lucky enough to be selected to be Captain Dick's runner and the two soon struck up a friendship, allowing Dad to explain that his father was interned in Yang Chow.

By another stroke of good fortune the Belfast had been assigned to sail with the Task Force for Shanghai at precisely the same time as my grandfather was granted priority release from his camp in order to return to Shanghai to get the Gas Company up and running again.

Word of this reached Captain Dick and on 19th September 1945 he granted Dad 24 hours compassionate leave to locate his father. And so it was that Dad was the first British sailor to set foot on Shanghai soil from the whole of the Allied squadron!

He managed to contact his father by phone from his office and he used to recall with great amusement how my grandfather had no idea to whom he was talking. He went through all his many brothers before realising that he was in fact talking to his 19 year old son, whose voice had broken since he had last seen him at the age of 14! He had absolutely no idea that Dad had even joined the Royal Navy. As you will imagine there followed an emotional reunion.

Sadly my grandfather's health deteriorated rapidly due to the years of malnutrition and hardship he had suffered at the hands of the Japanese and he passed away the following year.

This short time which Dad spent in the Navy (less than two years) left an indelible mark on him and I am sure that had we cut him in half he would have had the words 'Royal Navy' written straight through him like a stick of rock!

Summertime

Following the end of the War, my grandmother arranged for Dad to become an Articled Clerk in Torquay and this is where Dad learnt to be an accountant. Whilst my grandmother's intentions were, of course, of the very best, it was a crying shame that Dad was designated off to a life of working with figures and balance sheets; his first love was the sea; his second was people and this job gave him little contact with either. Still he persevered and ended up, ironically, working for Philips and Sons, the shipbuilders down at Noss in Kingswear.

These days were financially hard times; I remember him explaining that he could not afford a car and so bought a little scooter on which he travelled back and forth from his home in Paignton. A cold journey in the winter!

There were plenty of happy times, though. He joined the Royal Overseas Club in Torquay and this is where he met my mother, Heather. They started courting and, following a year long separation, when Mum took part in a teacher exchange programme in Miami, they married in October 1954.

Much fun was had over these early years together ñ Dad used to recount some hair-raising stories of how the men used to go on pub crawls together. 'We had a designated driver!' he used to chuckle, 'The only problem was he used to end up so drunk we had to carry him into the driver's seat!' And they complain about the irresponsible youth of today!!

Mum and Dad's first home together was 'Treetops' in Paignton. They loved this house and the black and white cat, Tommo, who adopted them there. These were

amongst Dad's happiest times and I would describe these as the summer of his days.

The only thing which was missing in their lives was a child and for 12 long years they hoped to hear the pitter patter of tiny feet, but for whatever reason this alluded them for all this time. And then, with a move to Cornwall came the unexpected news that Mum was expecting and at the age of 40, Dad finally became a father.

I know that I was the apple of his eye, but he never let on! Typically disciplined himself, he insisted on high standards of behaviour and comportment from me, reminiscent of his days spent in Chefoo and in the Navy. Slumping at his table was definitely not an option!

He was indeed straight as a die in both character and in stance. His gait was so distinctive that the bank clerk in Totnes used to hear the distinctive clip clop of his metal heel tips and have his money ready without even looking up.

It has been touching, yet unsurprising, how so many people have referred to him in the last couple of weeks as one of life's true gentlemen. His manners were impeccable and his love of people was apparent from the first moment you were in his company. He used to remember intricate details about people many years later and this, I think, endeared him to the many people who came across him in business and in pleasure.

There followed a number of years of working for F. J. Reeves, later to become part of the Graham Group, the builders merchants. He was loyal to the company to the end, and would always wave to every Graham lorry driver he passed singing 'Up the group' He even had Mum and me at it in the end!

It was only when the company relocated to Huddersfield that he took the difficult decision to take early retirement and so it was that at the age of 61 he found himself a man of leisure.

Autumn

The autumn of Dad's life was a long and happy one, but also tinged with the sadness of losing my mother to a brain tumour when he was only 64. The decision to take early retirement 3 years earlier was evidently a fortuitous one as it allowed them to enjoy a couple of years of their retirement together before ill health put a stop to their pleasure. It seems so grossly unfair to me that they should have been robbed of this joy at such a young age, however, as we all know, life is not fair sometimes and we have to make the best of whatever situation we find ourselves in.

This is, of course, what Dad set out to do. He immersed himself in going out socialising, spending many hours with his treasured RNA chums and joining other associations including the Normandy Vets and the Civic Society and I know many of you here today are from these associations. He was very rarely to be found at home, his naturally gregarious nature hating every moment of being home alone. Suddenly I found that, with a young family myself, the tables were turned and I was the one stuck at home whilst my father was out gallivanting around the country! His love of driving stood him in good stead and he must have covered many thousands of miles in these early days of being on his own.

During this time he became a grandfather to his three beloved grandchildren, Ben, Ed and Gracie and he used to take great pleasure in hearing about all their antics. When the boys were old enough, he arranged a memorable visit to his HMS Belfast

with them. I can only imagine the pride with which he recounted his many tales of life on board to them!

Over the years Dad had regularly visited our neighbour, Dave Beach, who was confined to a wheelchair, to share stories of days gone by on board their respective ships. Following Dave's passing, he remained friendly with Dave's wife, Pat, and this friendship eventually blossomed into love and on the 6th October 2000 they married at Oldway Mansion.

Pat was, in many ways, Dad's soul mate. Unlike my own mother, she enjoyed the many social events which came with the membership of so many associations and threw herself into accompanying and supporting Dad in all these activities. Together they started cruising with Princess Cruises, which allowed them both a taste of the extravagance of luxury travel and of course, for Dad, gave him the immeasurable pleasure of being back at sea.

He also very much enjoyed getting to know Pat's own three children, Chris, Lesley and Nigel and her four grandchildren and treated them as his own family.

Wintertime

Dad continued to enjoy good health and looks which belied his true age right up to the age of 89. Sadly though, as you will all know, cancer caught up with him in the end as it has done with many of his good friends, and in November of last year, almost exactly one year ago to this day, he was diagnosed with myeloma, a cancer of the plasma cells in the bone marrow.

His approach to this was the same as his approach to life in general; just a bump in the road he would say. This was always going to be a mere temporary inconvenience in his head, and in true fighting spirit he proceeded to plan his 90th birthday party from his hospital bed.

I am convinced that this positive mental attitude which he applied to all aspects of his life was partly responsible for his miraculous recovery in March last year which allowed him to enjoy the company of some of his friends and family at his wonderful 90th birthday party at the Livermead House Hotel in April. This was such a happy day for us all and we are very thankful that he was able to enjoy this landmark in such comparatively good health. I hope that you will be able to join us there again after the service for a wake to celebrate his long life.

I am so very grateful that he was able to enjoy so many happy years with Pat, and she has in recent times been a devoted carer to him, which in turn has permitted him to stay at home for most of his last year.

Unfortunately the disease took hold of him again and in September of this year he was readmitted to Torbay Hospital. He remained positive and gracious to the end and when his time came to go, he died a very dignified death, which seems so appropriate given the extreme dignity with which he conducted himself throughout his life.

And so it is that I bring this eulogy to a close. Dad's wintertime was thankfully very short lived and he lived a long and interesting life with his love of the sea apparent throughout.

God bless you Dad. We will remember you with the utmost respect.