

Jim's Funeral

I have been asked by Jim's nephew, Bill Flint, to say a few words about Jim.

It doesn't seem long since I was doing the same thing at his hundredth birthday party and we were celebrating. But although the occasions are very different and it is impossible not to feel sad, I feel we should still celebrate a life well lived and a life well filled.

Many of you here will have known Jim a lot longer than I have, even going back to cricketing days just before and just after the war so I hope you'll forgive a young whippersnapper talking about someone you may have known a lot longer than me.

Jim was born in Nottingham on May 24th 1913. He was the youngest of four children, Mabel, the eldest, then Walter, Bill and finally Jim. He left school at 14, as was common in those days and went to train as an accountant with the firm of R.A. Page in the city. Sometime in 1938 he signed up at Tollerton Airport for the RAF Volunteer Reserve and started to train as a pilot. His brother Walter also signed up for the forces at about the same time.

Sadly, although the family found out that Walter was taken prisoner by the Japanese, he failed to return at the end of the war and they never knew what happened to him, a fate common to many young men of those dark times.

I first met Jim at Stanton golf club in the early sixties when things had changed since the war days but were still very different from to-day. When we first met I was totally unaware of his war service as it was never mentioned.

Those days in the sixties were when men were perhaps a little less thoughtful to their women folk.

So for Jim and the rest of us it would be golf on a Saturday afternoon, followed by streaky bacon, egg and chips, then darts, dominoes, snooker or cards and home at about 8.30.

So on many a Saturday evening I often found myself playing poker with him in the small committee room beside the bar at Stanton on the Wolds Golf Club.

As with all games, Jim was a very good player, whose expression never changed no matter what cards he drew, unlike another of our friends whose hand used to shake violently if he got a good hand. As in the rest of his sports Jim never failed to take advantage of an opponent's weakness and was quite happy to take his money.

Jim loved fishing, often talked about it when we played cards and offered to take me up to the river Dove, where he was a member of the Norbury Fishing Club. With endless patience he taught me the rudiments of fly fishing and it was while we would be driving up to the river in the years that followed, that I managed to wheedle out of him some details of his time in the RAF. As a school boy I had lived through the second world war and like all the other schoolboys of that time, I hero worshipped the pilots who flew the fighters and the bombers, determined to thwart Hitler's invasion plans.

It was hard to draw out details but as I did I grew more and more amazed at what this man and all the air crews had gone through, as he tried to explain what it was like to fly in the dark for hours over enemy territory to a well defended target; through anti aircraft fire sending up blankets of flak and fighters trying to shoot you down with cannon, knowing that if and when you did get back some of your friends never would. And then to go and do it all again a few days later. It was a humbling experience for someone like me who had never seen a shot fired in anger.

It was even more humbling when I eventually came to see his portrait hanging in the mess at RAF Scampton, in his full flying kit and read his list of decorations.

When we went over there to see the Red Arrows practice, it was remarkable to witness the respect shown by these young pilots, just back from the Iraq war, to this veteran of the night bombing campaign in the early forties, as they chatted to him afterwards about his time in the RAF.

As mentioned previously, Jim had joined up as a volunteer reservist at Tollerton aerodrome and some months later found himself trained as a pilot. Such was the shortage of aircraft for newly trained pilots at the beginning of the war and so desperate was he to fly in action that his first few missions were as a navigator and then co-pilot. But soon he was a sergeant pilot flying his own aircraft regularly over Germany and Poland. As well as night raids he also took part in daylight raids on Brest harbour, attacking the infamous German battleship Scharnhorst anchored there. It was after one night raid deep into Germany that he had to nurse his badly damaged Hamden back across the North Sea to crash land in the water as close to the beach as he dare, knowing the beach itself would be mined and laid with steel obstacles. His crew all escaped into the sea except the navigator, so Jim went back into the aircraft, crawled up the fuselage and hauled him out of the sinking plane. A soldier helped them both back to dry land. For this episode he won two awards, the Distinguished Flying Medal and the George Medal. The first for his exceptional flying skills in bringing back and ditching the aircraft and the second for his bravery in going back for his navigator. This was on his thirty second operation in July 1941 and was the second time Jim had successfully crash landed a stricken plane as captain, on the first having successfully saved the entire crew. On that earlier occasion Jim had been met by the farmer's wife bearing mugs of tea and then entertained to breakfast.

Later, Jim climbed rapidly through the ranks, having at first been reluctant to accept a commission. He became Commanding Officer of 50 Squadron, transferring to Lancasters, and flew another 20 sorties, supporting the D-Day landings and the crossing of the Rhine. He relinquished command in 1945 having attained the rank of Wing Commander, and was awarded the DFC.

Jim's survival through all this may have been down to luck to some extent, but he was pedantic in his checking of detail and a cool chooser of options. As he said, the more careful he was, the luckier he got but he always knew that the odds were stacked against him, especially when he was getting into forty missions accomplished.

Even years later, when we went fishing, he always checked the tyres before going and before driving back, a habit ingrained by the obligatory external inspection made on all aircraft before take-off.

After leaving the service, where red tape was starting to annoy him, Jim worked for Redmayne and Todd Sports in Nottingham and then for Pompadour in Derby.

I always felt though, that despite all his enjoyment of fishing and skiing and golf, nothing ever matched the tension and drama and comradeship of his service years, which was not surprising and something he had in common with many ex-servicemen.

After leaving the RAF, to keep in touch he joined the United Services club in Nottingham and was a well loved regular there for many years and a prominent attender of the Remembrance dinner every year. He often talked fondly of the good times he had there with Cliff Gillot and all his other friends when he lunched on Tuesdays and at other get-togethers.

He was also a member of the 50/61 Squadron Associations, rarely missing an annual reunion and a member of 49 Squadron Association.

As mentioned earlier Jim loved sport and as a cricketer was a very good one, twice taking all ten wickets in an innings in the local 'Test matches' North Notts versus South Notts, and sharing the field with such notables as Joe Hardstaff and Reg. Simpson. He was said to have remarkable pace off the wicket by those who knew, and he always regretted never quite getting a chance to bowl against Reg, whom he felt sure he could have 'sorted out'. When he did reach his hundredth birthday we joked that he had made a century at last even if it was the slowest ever recorded.'

He was also an excellent golfer, getting down to seven handicap and winning many cups at Stanton, and was a good enough skier to be an instructor. In fact Jim was one of those annoying people we all meet who seem to be good at everything.

He also had a spiritual side, especially in his later years since his dear wife Joyce died. He regularly attended services at Southwell Cathedral and Edwalton parish church for periods of worship and quiet meditation. I was never sure if this was because of an increasing sense of piety or because he had a lot to confess to his maker but I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I'm sure it was the former.

For just short of the last two years of his life Jim was looked after by Sue Godfrey and her staff at Richmand House. Jim was very happy there and Sue's daughter Jennie often accompanied him when he went to RAF functions away from Nottingham or on holiday breaks or local events. It was great to see the twinkle return to Jim's eyes when she was around and Jim's family and friends are all very grateful to Richmand House for their kindness and unstinting support in this last period of his life..

It was a sadness that Jim and Joyce were not able to have children due to medical complications. I am sure he would have been a great father, just as he was a great bloke, even if in his very late years he did tend to repeat the same fishing stories, no matter how hard I tried to interrupt.