

TRIBUTE TO MICHAEL JOHN SAWBRIDGE:

21st October 1937 – 27th September 2015

(Ceremony was preceded by a flypast of an RAF Hercules
from Brize Norton)

When preparing for today's ceremony, Carol and I talked about Mike's life and its many different stages and she wrote a mini-biography of him. Much of what I am going to say now is taken from Carol's words – no-one knew him better than she did.

Like every aviator Mike had an interesting and varied life flying the world, with various scrapes and incidents and making lifelong friendships along the way, although inevitably he had had some less happy years at boarding school, as an Articled Accountant and in BA.

Mike was born in Recife in Brazil in October 1937 where his father had settled after the First World War. We shall hear something of this later from Martin. He was then taken to a drab post-war England at the age of 10 to attend Hereford Cathedral School, which was Dickensian, always cold, with rotten food, fagging for sadistic prefects and masters who would give six of the best for small misdemeanours.

He was homesick and a year academically behind his contemporaries, so he used to swot in the outdoor latrines after lights out as this was the only place with an electric bulb. Holidays were spent with various uncles and aunts and occasionally with some school chums - usually farmers' sons, and he did enjoy being the cox in the school rowing eight, so it was not all bad!

When he left school at 17 Mike rejoined his family who had by then moved to Torquay, and was articled as an accountant locally, which he hated. Fortunately, after 18 boring months he was called up into the RAF in the last National Service draft. One day at RAF Yatesbury he was asked if he would like to apply for pilot training. Having never considered aviation as a career Mike thought he would try it and it was then in 1957 his life literally took off.

From Fred da Costa:

- 1 I first met Mike at RAF South Cerney 58 years ago in 1957 where the RAF was training us to be “Officers and gentlemen!”
- 2 Among his many attributes, Mike was a confident individual with a healthy scepticism towards authority, an “off beat” sense of humour and a liking for beer – I knew we would hit it off – I was 18 and he was 20.
- 3 We did our “wings” training on the Vampire jet at RAF Oakington near Cambridge. It was here in the glorious summer of 1959 that we all adopted the off duty uniform of straw boaters and bow ties – suggested of course by Mike!
- 4 It was in Cambridge that Mike formed a lifelong passion for punting, and he always punted the Cambridge way – standing on the back platform and he insisted on doing this, even in Oxford. Also he got into an informal Transport Command rowing eight. So he was particularly proud when his son Mark competed at Henley Royal Regatta two years running – but taking it rather more seriously than his dad.
- 5 After “wings” we went to RAF Valley in Wales to await our expected postings to the Hunter day fighter aircraft. However, the RAF had other ideas and sent us to fly the Hastings transport aircraft based near Bath.
- 6 On our first overseas trip, to RAF Idris near Tripoli, I remember us sitting out in the balmy Mediterranean evening, under a date palm tree in the garden of the Officers’ Mess, with the inevitable beer. We agreed that “maybe there are compensations to this transport flying lark!”
- 7 Mike was now posted to 114 Sqn at RAF Colerne near Bath.
- 8 We enjoyed excellent relations with the Bath police – nothing at all to do with the fact that the Chief Constable held the DFC and his daughter was going out with Toby Taplin, a colleague of ours! In fact I remember an occasion, just after we had arrived in Bath. We went down into the city in Mike’s splendid car, a Jowet Javelin. Later on, and after several beers, we got into the car, Mike started the engine and the exhaust fell off! As we roared up Landsdown Hill we noticed

a policeman watching our progress. Mike took a wrong turn at the bottom of the hill and came up Landsdown a second time. This time the policeman stepped forward off the pavement and raised his hand. "Is this your car, sir?" he enquired of Mike. "Yesh Officer" came the reply. "What is the registration number of your car, sir?" At which Mike said "One moment" then walked round to the front of the car and held onto it, as he bent down, rather unsteadily, to read off the number! The police officer actually smiled as he told us where to go to return to RAF Colerne and said "and get that exhaust fixed before you come back into Bath!"

- 9 In 1961 we were both posted to 70 Sqn at RAF Nicosia in Cyprus, where our commanding officer was Mickey Martin, an Aussie and one of the Dambuster pilots.
- 10 After a thoroughly enjoyable year in Cyprus, it was decided to reduce the size of the squadron, so one co-pilot was required to volunteer to be "short toured". As both Mike and I wanted to be that volunteer, we decided to toss a coin for it. I won and returned to the UK to do my captain's course.
- 11 Mike came home a year later and it was in the mess at RAF Thorney Island that he first met Carol. I like to think that I had a hand in that, by winning that toss of a coin. Mike might not have met Carol had it gone the other way!
- 12 After eight years in the RAF Mike exercised his option to leave; however he was later to observe "I spent eight years in the RAF and never stopped laughing - and then I got married!!"
- 13 In 1993 Mike and Carol came to holiday with Rosie and me at our RAF overseas posting in the Turks and Caicos Islands in the West Indies and after we returned home in 1995 we spent another most enjoyable holiday together - a pub crawl by canal boat!
- 14 Extract from *Flying West* by Capt Michael J Larkin

*There must be a place where old pilots go
When their pain is finished, and their airspeed is low
Where the whiskey is old and the women are young
And the songs about flying and dying are sung
Where you'd see all the fellows who'd flown west before
And they'd call out your name as you came through the door;
Who would buy you a drink if your thirst should be bad,
And relate to the others "He was quite a good lad!"*

Mike was not only a long term friend, but my best friend – Cheers Mike, we will raise a glass to you later – gone, but you will not be forgotten!

Back to celebrant:

Whilst Mike was at RAF Nicosia he was seconded to the Royal Jordanian Air Force in Amman in 1963. One evening in the Mess bar some Army pilots asked him if he would escort three army nurses to Petra the following day. They were flying to Aqaba and would drop them off at Petra and pick them up on their return flight. Mike readily agreed as he always wanted to visit the Rose Red City. Instructed to be at the airfield at dawn, Mike went to bed and for the first time ever he slept through the dawn call to prayer by the muezzin, which he had always relied on, and missed the flight. Rather annoyed with himself, he was in the bar later that evening when the Army pilots approached him and said 'Shame about the girls, eh?' A flash flood had swept down the gorge and all 20 tourists inside were killed!

And so Mike was spared to meet Carol in August 1964 at RAF Thorney Island, as we heard from Fred. An old pal from his training days had urged Carol to meet him when he came through on his Captain's course 'as she would like him'. So each Saturday during the summer in the Officers' Mess bar she would ask if he was there. On 22nd August someone said he was one of two men at the bar, but he didn't know which. Carol approached and asked which one of them was 'Sawtooth,' his early nickname. Mike looked down and said 'C'est moi!' Their 18 month courtship was undertaken at various RAF stations, always laughing with their mutual friends, and Bath

became a favourite base for reunions. It seemed every Transport Command Officers' Mess was issued with Ray Conniff tapes to play in the public rooms, so his music reminded them of those carefree courting days. When Mike left the RAF in 1965 he began the serious work of studying for his Airline Transport Pilot's Licence, which ate up all his £1,500 RAF gratuity and Carol's savings too.

After a stint with BEA he took the advice of an old RAF pal and joined East African Airways in Nairobi. Before leaving England Carol and Mike married at RAF Thorney Island, in the picturesque Saxon church, but Carol insisted he marry in uniform as permitted by being in the RAF Reserve. Mike's Best Blue uniform had turned green, so using his initiative he went to a theatrical costumier in London to hire one. It was the uniform worn by actor Richard Todd in the film 'Operation Crossbow' when he played a Wing Commander with no wings.

The happy couple flew off to Nairobi in April 1966. Mike's years with EAA were some of the best of his flying life. The airline bought three Super VC-10's which became his favourite aircraft. He then had a command on the twin engine Fokker Friendships flying inside East and Central Africa. Some of this was challenging but satisfying, landing on small airstrips surrounded by mountains in fierce thunderstorms. He became a training captain on the Friendships, and enjoyed teaching the young aspiring African pilots, even though there was the odd scary moment!

On one occasion flying into Kigali in Rwanda a young American asked to visit the flight deck to look down on the rain forests below. She was Dianne Fossey, going to study the gorillas. Another flight was returning President Nyerere of Tanzania from Mogadishu to Dar es Salaam. The pre-flight check including swinging the propeller to listen to the tumbling of a component inside. Mike was so preoccupied he didn't notice the President coming up behind him, who had to step smartly sideways off the red carpet to avoid being beheaded! Amazingly, nothing was said!

Mike and Carol had their two sons Mark and Martin in Kenya, and lived the good life of the expat in a spacious bungalow with five acres, a tennis court, stables, a horse, four dogs, and two servants. But unfortunately EAA was going under and Mike realised he would have to find another airline. He

was offered jobs with both Cathay Pacific in Hong Kong where many of his RAF friends were, and with BOAC.

After deliberating for weeks he chose to come back to England to BOAC in December 1970 to fly the ageing Boeing 707. It was a decision he later came to regret for professional and financial reasons. The family settled in Henley in 1971 and for the next 19 years raised their boys in an urban setting. The men of the family loved Henley, but Carol missed the life of a memsahib with a large shamba and her animals.

On a visit to Hong Kong with Carol, to see his old RAF comrades, Mike was nearly killed in a motor accident and left with severe injuries. It took him six months to recuperate, and this time off work stalled Mike's career, and frustratingly the line stopped above his name on a bid to go onto Concorde. During the mid-1970's recession when there was little flying Mike and another ex-RAF pal Roger Sleeman shared a taxi-driving job in Henley. Eventually things picked up and he joined the Tristar fleet. On one flight returning from Cairo Mrs Thatcher asked to go onto the flight deck. It was coming up to the budget and as she turned to go she asked if she ...'could do anything for you gentlemen?' Mike asked her politely not to put any more duty on beer. She flashed him a smile and said 'I'll see what I can do'. But as politicians do - she did. The lady was not for charming!

One period on Tristars Mike did enjoy was being seconded to the Air Force at RAF Brize Norton during the Falklands War flying troops down to the Ascension Islands.

Mike came to dislike the boredom of long haul flying and for the last years of his BA employment he went short haul on BAC 1-11's operating the shuttle back-up and flying European routes.

As he neared retirement he and Carol moved to Ewelme to provide a paddock for her horse, and widened their friendships. After he had to give up his favourite sport of squash in 1992, and until ill health intervened, Mike would daily walk the country paths around Ewelme – covering thousands of miles over the years. The neighbours would say that they could set their watches by seeing him march along the lane. It is by one of these paths, with a panoramic view over the Swyncombe Valley, that his ashes will be scattered.

Carol has received so many heartfelt tributes to Mike, but one touched her particularly. It was from his previous doctor who treated him for 19 years.

'Although GPs are not allowed "favourites", Michael was always one of the patients I enjoyed seeing as we could have a great chat, whilst sorting out his various ailments (to various degrees of success).

After I left the practice it was always a pleasure to catch up with him. He was a fanatical walker, enjoying our lovely village and the Chilterns, and I have fond memories of exchanging niceties and then a comment on the news or alike.

My thoughts are very much with you on the passing of a very fine man whom it was my honour to know.'

From Martin:

On behalf of the Sawbridge family...

I'd like to thank you all for coming today to pay respects to Mike (Dad). It's lovely to see so many faces from the past. It's a tribute to the sort of person Dad was that so many have come along today to pay their respects. As many of you know, Mike was very unassuming man and I'm sure he would be quite embarrassed by all the fuss, but also very happy to see so many old friends again.

It would be fair to say that I didn't really develop a close relationship with Dad until my early adult life. As that relationship grew, I came to realise that Dad had had a pretty interesting life, but because he was a reserved character I only got snippets of his past from time to time or from other people that knew Dad. So some of my fondest memories with Dad were oddly enough having a pint of Brakspears at a pub somewhere and those odd occasions when he would open up and talk about his days as a boy growing up in Herefordshire, or his days in the airforce, in Cyprus, his time

in Africa and of course being an airline pilot his travels around the World. So I'd like to share one or two stories that he talked about.

A boy in Brazil:

Some of you may know that dad was born and spent his early childhood in Brazil where his parents were living at the time. Now at the time, his father Harry was an accountant for a large retail firm in Recife, Brazil. One of his earliest childhood memories he has was going along with his Dad to pay the workers' wages in the more remote parts around that area. No electronic payment, not a simple case of driving in the car to deliver the wages because there were bandits in the area. They would travel in an armed motorcade with guards armed with tommy guns for protection. Guards would stand on the runner boards of the cars (1940's). For a young boy I could imagine that was the height of adventure, not too many five or six year olds would experience that these days!

Lightning strikes:

And most recently we were having a discussion about lightning!!! And I asked dad "had he ever been hit by lightning"? Meaning, whilst flying, as it's something that has happened to most pilots in their flying careers. Dad's reply was "Oh yes, I was taking my daily walk in Ewelme, and I could see a storm approaching, but I was out in an open field with no protection. So I hurried my pace a bit and suddenly I was face down on the ground with what seemed to be a ball of flame around me". And I said "what did you do"? He said "Well I must have been earthed pretty well because I picked myself up and walked home rather hurriedly before I got hit again"! I don't know about you, but I haven't met too many people who have been hit by lightning and lived to tell the tale. So I think this was one of those occasions that dad must have used up one of his nine lives!

Flat spin:

Another occasion that he may have used up one of his nine lives was during his advanced flying training in the RAF, he took a single seat Vampire MK1

up for some solo flying. Up until now Dad had been training in the two-seater training variant T.11 that was capable of doing aerobatics at high altitude. Now Dad wasn't a speedy reader. Had he been, he would no doubt have had a quick read of the flying manual which would have told him 'you don't loop a Vampire MK1 at 25,000ft'!!! You can do it in the T.11 but not the MK1. So as he got inverted at 25,000ft the jet lost lift and went into a flat spin. Now, as all the pilots amongst us today know, you don't want to get in to a flat spin... it's deadly!!! So as Mike was spinning out of control to the earth, he thought that his time to meet thy maker had come prematurely. Now the MK1 Vampire doesn't have an ejector seat, you simply have a handle that unwinds the canopy and I guess you sort of flop out the best you can!!! Just as dad was unwinding the canopy, the jet obviously descended into more dense air, the wings created lift again and he came right...peww disaster averted! So off he went on his merry way back to base to tell the tale over a pint and medals. When he got back to base, taxied over to the apron as he was climbing out Two stories: Mum's version (ground engineer asked if he had a "...good landing Sir?") showed him the back of the plane!... Dad's version... one of the flying instructors came shouting across the apron "SAWBRIDGE", grabbed him by the ear and dragged him behind the plane... So he may have got away with his life, but he managed to break the plane at a great cost to the tax payer no doubt!!!

Wrap up:

Dad's first love wasn't flying, it was architecture, seven years study bla bla. Despite that he would often relate the thrill and exhilaration of flying low and fast in the Vampire or doing aerobatics. So I'd like to finish by reading a poem by a Spitfire pilot Flying Officer John Gillespie Magee, and although Dad never had the chance to fly a Spitfire or Hurricane the thrill would have been the same in the Vampire. So this poem perfectly reflects the type of flying Dad used to enjoy and in fact any pilot can relate to.

*"Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air...
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace.
Where never lark, or even eagle flew —
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
- Put out my hand, and touched the face of God."*



After the committal, a poem chosen by Mike's family:

*We will not grieve; you would be saddened that we cry.
Death is but to sleep; you will awake to greet us in just a little while.
And as we walk the lonely miles without you
We glimpse your rest,
We know you are safe,
And once more we can smile.*

CLOSING WORDS:

And we are bound to smile when we think of Mike – he brought such delight and camaraderie to our lives. He was, without doubt, a quintessentially English gentleman; modest, diligent and professional in his work, honest, with a stiff upper-lip, somebody who played with a straight bat. Perhaps because he was born abroad, he appreciated England and all that it represented, and his love of the English countryside was a big part of his life. And there was that wonderful wry sense of humour and fun.

Mike played his own special part in our lives; who he was still lives in our minds. Our lives which are a part of his life go on, and the ripples of his life are still passing outward in known and unknown ways. With those present, with those who have gone and with those who are yet to be born, Mike has his own unique and permanent place in the history of humankind.

