

Chris Mullan



*Chris Mullan at Leuchars in 1966
Just behind and smiling at the squadron's Tiger*

We sadly have to record that **Chris Mullan** died on 12th March 2015. He served with the squadron from 1966 -1968. At his funeral Air Chief Marshal Sir John Allison spoke movingly of Chris and his eulogy is presented here as our tribute to a fine Tiger and Association member.

"As soon as he was old enough," said Sir John, "Chris joined the RAF as an apprentice and went on to be one of a small band of ex-apprentices who had done so well that the RAF selected them for officer and flying training at Cranwell. It is fair to say that Chris was one of the stand out characters in our entry. This was by virtue of his bold and strong personality and fearlessly outspoken and sometimes outrageous views. He was therefore entertaining company and was also popular because he was a sociable and friendly soul.

Chris had leadership qualities, a very good intellect and lots of flying aptitude, all of which ensured him an untroubled passage through Cranwell. He was one of the 41 young men who graduated in July 1964 out of the 60 who had started the course 3 years earlier.

After Cranwell, Chris was in the half of the pilots who were selected for the fast jet stream. Again he had no problems (he never did where flying ability was concerned) and graduated high enough from advanced flying training to be selected for the Lightning. This group went first to a pre-Lightning course on the Hunter at Chivenor which is where I got to know Chris better. Then we went to the Lightning OCU and met the aircraft that was to touch all our lives in varying degrees. For Chris, who flew the aircraft for far longer than any of the rest of us, I think it was one of the defining influences in his life, so it is important to understand the Lightning to have a full understanding of Chris.

The Lightning was a gloriously overpowered, single seat, supersonic interceptor. It climbed like a rocket and it went like the proverbial bat out of hell. What we all remember is that amazing climb, like lying on your back in a high speed lift, travelling at just short of the speed of sound, while the machine just kept pushing all the way to the tropopause. Despite all that performance it was easy enough to fly, but to operate it demanded the power of lucid thought under pressure and the ability

to cope with the loneliness of that tight little cockpit on a dark night far out over the North Sea in winter. The Lightning tested a man's character as well as his brain power and skill of hand.

Chris was posted to No 74 (Tiger) Squadron at Leuchars in Scotland, one of the most illustrious squadrons in the RAF. Home of famous pilots from past wars such as Mick Mannock and Sailor Malan, its history and traditions found expression with its fierce tiger's head emblem and its wonderful motto "I Fear No Man". All this somehow fitted with Chris' bold personality. Chris himself has said that given a less than happy childhood, 74 Squadron was the first really happy family he had known. He joined at a good time. The squadron was well led by an inspirational boss, it was operationally effective and it had a spirited and vital social life full of booze, banter and good fellowship. They knew how to party without crossing the line into misconduct. If ever a man was made for this life of exciting flying and off duty high jinks and sociability, it was the young bachelor Chris Mullan.

An interesting insight into Chris from that period comes from the wife of one of his fellow pilots, Ian McBride. Leslie McBride says "Chris wasn't just Ian's friend – he was a friend of mine". This tells us a lot. Chris wasn't only a man's man (although he certainly was) but was kind, thoughtful and gentlemanly. He was a friend to everyone. Irene Coville, wife of a fellow pilot on a later squadron, reinforces this view. Chris, she says, was the only one of all the bachelors on the squadron who brought flowers to supper and sent a thank you note afterwards.

The years on 74 were so happy for Chris that he became the moving spirit behind the annual reunions of the "Tengah Tigers", an age defying event that goes on to this day.

There was a more serious side to this period of Chris' life. He met Diane while at Leuchars and they went out together. But in 1967 the squadron was deployed permanently to RAF Tengah in Singapore. He and Diane kept in touch and on his return in 1968 Chris proposed, but Diane was not ready to commit so they went their separate ways. They met again by chance at Gatwick in 1981 and this time made no mistakes. The happy result was marriage – and the birth of their son, Kit. I love the romance of that story.

However, back to 1968 when Chris was sent to the Central Flying School to do the course to become a Qualified Flying Instructor. This was not the most inspired move by the RAF which is usually pretty good at putting round pegs in round holes. Chris did not think well of the standards of flying that CFS deemed acceptable and was typically outspoken in expressing his views. The outcome was that he was sent back to fly Lightnings which was a much better use of his talents. He was sent to No 5 Squadron to be part of the team that won the prestigious AFCENT Trophy. He played an important role in the work up, acting as "Judge and Mentor".

The hectic social life so typical of fighter squadrons in those days continued. Chris organized a Toga Party to be given by the bachelors to thank the long suffering wives who had given them traditional eggy bakes on many Friday nights/Saturday mornings. Unfortunately he spent too many hours in the bar in the time leading up to the party and forgot to obtain a toga. About an hour in to the party someone noticed that there was something familiar about his toga – it was the counterpane from his bed in the Mess.

Next Chris was sent on the prestigious Interceptor Weapons Instructors Course and then posted to 19 Squadron in Germany where the operational role was conducted over land and at low level.

In 1973 Chris left the RAF. His had been a somewhat turbulent career, distinction in some aspects being offset at other times by a seemingly incorrigible habit of arguing with his boss. Chris once said to me rather wistfully that he knew he had a reputation for being a rebel and a risk taker but that actually he was pretty sensible and responsible. His life bears that out.

He went, as did many others at that time and afterwards, to become a contract pilot with British Aerospace who had just started operating Lightnings out of Dhahran for the Royal Saudi Air Force. He did that for 4 years before coming home to become an airline pilot. Thus ended his long association with an outstanding and very demanding aircraft. This may be a bit fanciful, but I sometimes wonder whether the reason Chris fitted the aircraft so well lay in the match between its uncompromising design philosophy, which sacrificed every other consideration to performance, and Chris' own uncompromising approach to life.

In 1977 Chris started work for Dan Air, a relationship that lasted for 16 years until the Company went into receivership. Here we see a mature Chris in a settled job and, following his marriage to Diane, working for his wife and son.

Airlines work on seniority, so the end of Dan Air saw the end of all his accumulated investment in his career within the company. From then on he became a contract pilot and flew for numerous airlines and worked in some interesting places, such as Bhutan and, ultimately, the Seychelles. He finished there in 2002 when he reached the normal retiring age for airline pilots of 60.

The retirement years were happy for Chris and Diane and filled with visits to their lovely home in New Zealand, golf, swimming, skiing and time on the computer on which Chris was expert and a lively social life.

Chris died as bravely as he had lived, keeping his illness secret from all except those closest to him. That was his wish, to keep on being himself for as long as he could. I last spent some time with him in November, at the Lightning pilots' reunion. I can picture him now, sitting in a typical pose at the bar, pint in hand, smiling, friendly, looking at me with those bright, intelligent eyes, evaluating and weighing my words, poised for the joy of challenging any loose statement. I had no idea he was so ill. I now know that he knew what he was facing.

That is the story of Chris' life, in brief. But what was it about him that made him so lovable a person to so many people? It goes well beyond the fact that he was sociable, outgoing, warm, friendly, kind and thoughtful and possessed of a generous spirit, although those are all factors that drew people to him and made him so very likeable. Nor was it just that he was highly intelligent, quick witted, well-informed, technically savvy, and cultured. He was an accomplished man and that, too, made him very interesting company.

There was yet more to Chris, even than all that. What made him so special, the source of his personal magnetism was, I think, that there was something indomitable about Chris. His unyielding integrity coupled with the courage to speak out against authority never left him. At a personal level I always felt on my mettle to respond to his questioning intelligence. The challenge was to live up to his expectations and, in particular, to match his honesty, as he would unerringly seize upon any loose statement or pretentiousness. Being with him was enormously stimulating.

But he was not just argumentative in the safe company of his friends when debates were just for fun. Chris was braver than that. His pursuit of truth and his desire to improve things (and, frankly, his love of a good argument) led him time and again to challenge authority. Chris was no diplomat, nor even a pragmatist. He was always himself – full on. His disinclination to trim his sails to the prevailing wind was not always to his advantage but he set a fine example of courage and integrity to us all. This mixture of great strength and self-inflicted vulnerability was, for me, what made him lovable.

Above all, Chris was one of the most vital men I have ever known. The life force in him burnt so strongly and brightly that it is hard to accept that it is now extinguished. It never will be in my mind."