

Group Captain Michael John Forsyth Shaw CBE

1937 – 2021

Mike Shaw died peacefully at his Lincolnshire home on Sunday 8th February. This appreciation of Mike's life is taken from the eulogy delivered at his funeral by his son Andrew.



Dad's story began when he was born in Cheshire to Elinor and Eric. At the outbreak of World War 2 his father, who served as a reservist officer with the Royal Artillery, was called up, so dad and his mother went to live in their grandparents' house in Keswick in the Lake District. In 1939, dad's sister Judith was born. When Mary, the house keeper, told dad that he now had a baby sister, dad asked what a baby sister was. When he found out, he wasn't hugely impressed and said he would prefer to have an aeroplane. This was an early indication of what was to come.

Spending the war years in The Lakes was an idyllic time in dad's life, venturing out in rowing boats on Derwent Water, walking in the hills, going on summer holidays to St Bees. The Lake District was dad's spiritual home. Later in life dad's visits to The Lakes would be very fleeting as he would roar down the valleys and across the lakes at 250 feet and 420 knots! After the war the family moved back to Nantwich and dad went to Sandbach school. He was gifted at both the humanities and the sciences. He played rugby and cricket and represented the school at chess matches. He studied maths, physics and chemistry at 'A' level. In his final year he was Head of School and also Head of the Combined Cadet Force.

When I asked him recently when he first thought about a career in the RAF, dad said that when he was 12 he decided that "the RAF needed him." Although he had a provisional place at Bristol University to study aeronautical engineering as part of an apprenticeship with Rolls Royce, at the age of 18 dad went through the rigorous selection procedure for the RAF and secured a cadetship at RAF College, Cranwell. He was Under Officer of C Squadron, 75 Entry. When he

passed out of Cranwell three years later he was awarded the Philip Sassoon prize for academics and also the Queen's Medal. Although he didn't know it then, his greatest achievement at Cranwell was meeting his future wife, my mum Judy. Mum's father Geoffrey was also an RAF pilot and a senior officer at Cranwell so she had grown up with the RAF and was already fully trained to be an RAF officer's wife. After a four year courtship mum and dad were married at St Clement Danes on the Strand on January 27th 1962.

In so many ways dad could not have been more suited for a career as an RAF fighter pilot. His calm temperament, self-assurance, integrity and his values, all wrapped up with a brilliant sense of humour, were an ideal fit. His RAF career spanned 36 years, nearly all of which was during the height of the Cold War. He flew some of the earliest RAF fighter jets such as the Vampire and Meteor, as well as iconic jets of the Cold War era such as the Lightning and Phantom. In 1975 he flew the F-15 in the US to evaluate it for the RAF. When he was Station Commander of RAF Honington in 1982 he oversaw the formation of the very first operational Tornado GR.1 squadron and this was one of the last aircraft he flew. In all he flew at least fifteen different types and of all of them his favourite was the Hunter.

Just two years after graduating from Cranwell dad returned as a QFI to teach the students to fly the Vampire. This must have felt quite strange for the students to be taught by an instructor with about twenty minutes more flying experience than them. Later, after learning to fly the Hunter, dad was selected to fly the Lightning as a QFI with The Tigers at RAF Coltishall. He described the Lightning as an "aluminium tube, housing two huge engines and a frightened teenager inside." Dad spent many long hours on QRA, often sitting in the cockpit ready to go at any time and in all weathers. He said they'd take off if there was enough visibility to see just three runway lights.

In August 1963 dad was posted to fly with the US Marines at Cherry Point in North Carolina. Mum, dad and my sister Philippa travelled out there on the 'Queen Mary'. Dad was training new Marine pilots to fly the Phantom. He said the Marine 'Fannum' did not have dual controls as the Marines could apparently do anything without training. He described the flying as pretty risky as he had to sit in the back with no controls as the student flew the aircraft, but not only that he still didn't speak American! In all he flew check rides with 17 new pilots. This was also the first aircraft he'd flown which required two crew and he wasn't entirely sure what the purpose of having a navigator was other than to have some 'talking ballast' which kept the centre of gravity in the right place!

In 1968, whilst back at RAF Kenley on his first of three postings to the Ministry of Defence (or the 'Ministry of Silly Walks', as he called it), I was born at home. My other sister Amanda had been born in the States. Dad delivered me as the doctor was probably out playing golf. He disentangled the umbilical cord from around my neck, then held me up by my ankles to see if I was breathing. When asked later how he managed to deliver me he said "a fighter pilot can do anything".

Mum and dad had an amazing and devoted marriage. Mum gave up her own promising career, which started at the UN, to support dad in his career. In all they moved 21 times including the US once and Germany twice. They both enjoyed a fantastic social life in the RAF and met life-long friends both through the RAF and outside. Mum and dad's long association with Woodhall Spa began in 1974 when dad was posted to RAF Coningsby as OC 228 OCU and they bought their house there.

Dad was naturally talented at whatever he put his mind to and was precise and accurate with everything he did. This included punctuality, which probably stemmed from his pilot training to achieve a Time Over Target of plus or minus 5 seconds. In the days long before satnav, at the beginning of long journeys he would tell us exactly when we would arrive and then be spot on. I recall when mum and dad were going to yet another dinner party I would often hear dad say "Judy, if we don't leave now, even if we travel at the speed of light, we'll be 7 minutes late".

He had a deep interest in cars and a preference for Jaguars, owning several during his life, including the classic Mark 2. He was also a talented artist with his favourite topic being aircraft. He painted these with incredible accuracy from memory. He could also paint fantastic portraits and landscapes. He painted murals and was even asked by his mother-in-law to paint a scenic mural to cheer up their rather poky bathroom in Chiswick. She warned him "but, Mike - NO aeroplanes please". Dad painted an amazing scene from the Lake District in the bathroom. It was actually quite disconcerting to be sitting in the bath when it felt like you were on the top of Castle Head, surrounded by fell walkers. Naturally, whilst forbidden to paint an aeroplane, when you looked up at the ceiling there was a faint contrail of a jet passing high overhead.

In an era when the loss of aircrew was all too commonplace, dad had his share of in-flight emergencies although fortunately he never had to eject and he brought every aircraft home. There was one sortie that really did shake him up though. In 1979, during a sortie in a Buccaneer over the North Sea, the aircraft began suffering multiple unrelated failures which indicated a fire. With no

comms, faulty instruments and the aircraft steadily dying, he nursed it back to Honington with both crew ready to eject at any moment. They landed safely and when the engineers opened the aircraft's bomb bay large charred pieces of aircraft fell out. The aircraft never flew again. Later they estimated that the aircraft had less than two minutes' flight time left before it became a fireball. Shortly after this sortie dad developed double vision for a while which was an early symptom of what would later be diagnosed as Multiple Sclerosis. This condition remained with him for life, insidiously chipping away at his health.

In 1992 dad received a CBE and retired to Woodhall Spa. Mum and dad enjoyed an active retirement. But in 2000 dad suffered a massive stroke which he described as "a hydraulic leak, leading to an electrical failure." His Millennium Stroke as he called it left him paralysed down his right-hand side and in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Combined with MS steadily eroding his remaining mobility he was unable to pursue many of the hobbies that he enjoyed including painting. It is truly remarkable then, especially after having such an active RAF career, that he bore his ailments with tremendous fortitude and incredible stoicism, never complaining about his lot. He never lost his positive outlook. Mum has been dad's rock throughout their marriage, especially in the last twenty one years when she effectively became his full time carer. The level of care she gave him is astonishing.

Dad lived a very full life and what he did in all aspects of it he did exceptionally well. He was a true gentleman. His legacy will endure not only in his family but in the memories of all those who knew and loved him. We will never forget his kindness, his ready smile, his sparkle and the laughter.



Mike and Judy at the squadron's 100th Anniversary Reunion